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***"True Americanism": The Rise of America's  
Nazis in the Great Depression***

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## **Abstract**

I argue that the Great Depression played an essential role in the proliferation and consequent prosecution of the German-American Bund. Economic and cultural trauma associated with the depression, combined with ethnic alienation experienced by interwar German-Americans, allowed the appeal of Nazism to spread to citizens within the United States. This phenomenon implies that while the American Nazi movement began as an organized attempt by Nazi Germany to spread propaganda internationally, the German-American Bund ultimately developed into a means for frustrated American citizens to voice genuine concerns about American government. To substantiate this argument, this thesis will contemplate popular conceptions of nationalism, both American and German, during the interwar years, and will analyze how members of the Bund, or Bundists, reconciled these notions into a distinctly American form of Nazism. Finally, this thesis will demonstrate that the Bund's hybrid brand of nationalism contributed to their ultimate downfall, provoking greater discontent from domestic critics, which ended with the Bund's dissolution in 1941. As a result, this thesis contributes to academic conceptions of un-Americanism, as well as contextualizes the Nazi group in a period of United States history that emphasizes popular shifts in radical ideology.

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Madison Square Garden, February 20, 1939

## **Introduction**

On February 20, 1939, thousands of curious bystanders crowded the entrance of New York City's famous Madison Square Garden. As described by *The New York Times*, Nazis had apparently invaded the United States.<sup>1</sup> From across the state, droves of interested parties came to defend their home from the alleged infiltration of a devious foreign ideology. Inside the stadium, the sight was even more peculiar; nearly 22,000 American citizens dressed in full Nazi regalia saluted a three-story tall portrait of George Washington. Surrounding the picture of Washington, American flags and swastikas hung side by side.

The residents of urban New York had just encountered the German-American Bund, the largest organized Nazi movement within the borders of the United States of America. After the infamous rally at Madison Square Garden, the members of the Bund made national headlines. Fearful of the spread of fascism on American shores, journalists, intellectuals, and elected officials alike scrambled to find the leader behind this movement. Thus, observers came to know Fritz Julius Kuhn, a naturalized citizen of the United States who faithfully served as *Bundesführer*. A fiery personality with a penchant for public organization, Kuhn soon became the object of several federal, state, and municipal investigations, until the state of New York eventually convicted him of grand larceny in December of 1939. Without an effective leader, the German-American Bund slowly dwindled from American historical memory.

Since the Bund's disappearance from the national spotlight, academics have attempted to explain the meteoric rise and fall of the infamous Nazi group. Why did

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*, February 20, 1939.

Nazism spread to the United States, and why did it hold appeal during the Great Depression? Such a speculative question requires an equally speculative answer. This is not to say that scholars must simply guess at the motivations of American Nazis; rather, historians must weigh whatever evidence does exist to build a consistent and plausible depiction of the past.

Consequently, the goal of this thesis is threefold. The first task is to establish that the German-American Bund was an American group dedicated to life within the United States. While other historians have noted connections between prior manifestations of the Bund and propaganda agencies within Germany, this group primarily existed as a fully independent entity that was led, populated, and funded by German-American citizens.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, primary evidence indicates a desire on behalf of the Bundists to reform American society under an Aryan-led fascist regime. While most would acknowledge that the Bund's vision was radical and racially-motivated, this thesis argues that the Bund was dedicated to forging a national identity congruent with both German and American nationalist traditions and was committed to life within the United States. This fact casts doubt on the interpretation that Bundists were foreign agents sent to corrupt American democracy.

Second, this thesis will argue that the Great Depression played a vital role in the emergence of the Bund during the late 1930s. A history of the American Nazi movement's transition from the Friends of the New Germany to the German-American

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the term German-American generally refers either to German individuals who immigrated to the United States to become naturalized citizens, or to those who were the immediate children of immigrants. For other types of American citizens of German descent, this paper will refer to those individuals as such, or as native-born Americans of German extraction. For more on this distinction see Robert Billinger, *Americans from Germany: A Study in Cultural Diversity* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1974).

Bund must account for shifts in demography, ideology, and rhetoric. Only by understanding the cultural effects of the Great Depression can historians explain this change. During the depression, many Americans rallied around novel notions of progress and perseverance. Coming to new understandings of Americanism, popular figures and elected officials alike rejected ethnicities that did not fit into this new understanding of nationalism and suspected these apparent outsiders of foreign agency and sedition. As a result, insults against German nationality compounded economic distress within a small group of German-Americans, which inspired their rejection of American liberalism in favor of National Socialism.

Finally, this paper will analyze the response of non-Bundists to the organization. Academics can reasonably conclude that the German-American Bund failed to attain its goal within the United States. Not only did it never place a political candidate in office, but the organization also effectively vanished from national memory in just a matter of years. This was due predominantly to conventional society's nearly unanimous rejection of Bundist thought. From a cultural perspective, common society rejected the Bund's hybridization of German and American nationalism. Instead, most people, including government officials, saw the Bund as a duplicitous foreign agency that used thinly veiled propaganda to dupe the American people. As a result, Americans generally viewed the organization as a security threat, one the state must eliminate to protect citizens from the growing Nazi presence.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: the first section discusses previous academic literature on the German-American Bund. This will analyze and critique previous historical interpretations of the American Nazi movement and suggest areas in



which this work can contribute. After these introductory comments, Chapter One presents the roots of American Nazism and its earliest form, the Teutonia Association. The second chapter follows the association's transition from an isolated Nazi group to an organic American movement, a phenomenon that I argue must incorporate the context of the Great Depression. In an attempt to explain the appeal of National Socialism on American shores, the third chapter contextualizes the rise of the German-American Bund within the greater radical discourse of the 1930s. Finally, the fourth chapter compares the Bund's political philosophy with broader understandings of Americanism, thus explaining public outrage against American Nazism.

By situating the German-American Bund within the greater context of the 1930s, not only can historians better understand the forces that allowed the Bund to flourish, but they can also develop a better understanding of American culture in general. The Great Depression forced many Americans besides Nazis to question the meaning of their national identity, and these developing elements of Americanism continued to function as an influential force throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

## Historiography

After the fall of the German-American Bund in the early 1940s, the controversial group left behind more questions than answers. Initially, the federal government described the Bund as a duplicitous attempt by Nazi Germany to infiltrate the American Republic. Since then, however, historians have analyzed the forces that shaped the Bund, which necessarily involves reflection on the motivations of both its members and its enemies. Ultimately, historians have reached varying conclusions. While some researchers believe this group was the product of Nazi infiltration aimed at destroying democracy, others have followed a more nuanced strategy, analyzing the intellectual and social roots of the Bund's membership to derive more culturally-substantive conclusions. The historiography of the Bund reveals a shift in methodology for historians. As historians have reevaluated underlying assumptions about the nature of totalitarian movements, perspectives surrounding the German-American Bund have shifted from accusations of treason to analysis of cultural and institutional forces that made such activity desirable.

As one of the first historians concerned with the German-American Bund, Joachim Remak first framed the debate in "'Friends of the New Germany': The Bund and German-American Relations." Written in 1957, this article was one of the first pieces to utilize newly released archival evidence from the German Foreign Office--documentation that was later deposited in the *NSDAP: Hauptarchiv* (National Socialist German Worker's Party Main Archive) at Stanford University.<sup>3</sup> With this resource, Remak attempted to answer the following questions: "What, first of all, was the background of the Bund, and

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<sup>3</sup> Joachim Remak, "'Friends of the New Germany': The Bund and German-American Relations," *Journal of Modern History* 29 (March 1957): 38-41

what was its strength? To what extent was it an instrument of German policy?"<sup>4</sup> Implicit in Remak's research question was the commonly held belief that the Bund was an arm of Hitler; the author only wanted to know the extent of Hitler's control.

Unsurprisingly, Remak's conclusion reflects the implications suggested by his question: "[A]s it turns out, American suspicions were entirely correct, for the Bund was, in fact, an offshoot of the German Nazi party."<sup>5</sup> Evidence for this came from the fact that some members of the Bund, including its leader, Fritz Kuhn, were also former members of the Friends of the New Germany; the latter had been partially financed by the German Foreign Institute, a Nazi propaganda machine. Remak acknowledges, however, that while Germany disbanded the Friends in 1935, membership of the newly established German-American Bund in 1936 skyrocketed for three more years.<sup>6</sup> The cause of this rise in membership, according to Remak, resulted not from an increase in German-Americans wishing to practice Nazi politics, but rather from the deceit of Fritz Kuhn, who "misled his followers... by boasting about his uninterrupted influence with Nazi leaders."<sup>7</sup> Remak's analysis paints the Bund not as an organization of independent and disenchanted Americans, but rather as the result of a manipulative ploy by Nazi Germany to insert itself into the United States to spread its foreign ideology.

This interpretation is certainly vulnerable to critique. The German-American Bund was composed of more people than simply Fritz Kuhn and the German Foreign Institute. Living and thinking individuals filled its ranks, and an argument that explains the rise and fall of the Bund must consider this aspect as well. In *The Nazi Movement in*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 40.

*the United States 1924-1941*, Sander A. Diamond skims the surface of this analysis. Publishing his work in 1974, Diamond briefly dissected the intellectual roots of the movement; he wanted to explore the concept of *Deutschtum*, or Germanness: the concept of an inherent dignity within all individuals of German extraction that imbued them with a natural loyalty for their home country.<sup>8</sup> Diamond argues that this set of cultural practices was largely responsible for the popular Nazi movement. To bolster his argument, Diamond makes use of the final version of the *NSDAP: Hauptarchiv*, which gave him unprecedented access to previously unattainable documentation. Despite this resource, however, Diamond's argument ultimately fails to explain convincingly the cause of the 1936 boom in membership. Attributing this rise in public appeal to "Kuhn's quest for recognition," Diamond draws intellectual conclusions similar to Remak's: that the Bund's relatively high popularity was the result of its leader's act of "willful deception" to lead German-Americans into believing he retained Hitler's endorsement.<sup>9</sup> The author suggests that the Bund was not a legitimately "Americanized" organization, but was rather the result of Kuhn's thinly veiled propaganda campaign to "deceive both the American and German governments" into recognition of the organization's legitimacy.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, Diamond positioned the debate in the right framework. He demonstrated the intention of analyzing the cultural practices that made the Bund appealing to a small minority. The Bund's emphasis on Germanness has a role to play, but the assertion that every achievement the Bund counted after 1936 resulted from

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<sup>8</sup> Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

Kuhn's deception is difficult to defend. The author attempts to place all the blame on Kuhn, without analyzing the thoughts and feelings of the American citizens, native or not, who populated the group. Admittedly, Diamond holds the members of the Bund in low esteem. According to Diamond, Bundists were "irrational," and unlike true Americans, they were simply the puppets of their political leader.<sup>11</sup> Why did these individuals attach themselves to Nazism in the first place, and why did they do so during the Great Depression? These questions still remain unanswered.

During the late '80s and '90s, scholarship on the German-American Bund took a decided turn. Recent works on the Bund have emphasized the social, political, and economic traumas that made the group appealing. The best example of this work, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* by Susan Canedy, describes the Bund as an attempt to address the "confusion and dissatisfaction" that characterized the interwar period.<sup>12</sup> As a social historian, Canedy concludes that the Bund was categorically an "American group,... sensitive to the changes occurring in American society."<sup>13</sup> Deviating from her predecessors, Canedy espouses a different conception of human rationality. These people were not intellectually docile creatures who accepted every kernel of Nazi propaganda. Rather, it was social, cultural, and economic forces, more than Fritz Kuhn, that shaped the decisions they made. Of chief importance to Canedy was the cultural relationship between newly nationalized German-American citizens and their adopted country. According to Canedy, the Bund was the result of the legacy of World War I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park: Markgraf Publishing Group, 1990), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

propaganda.<sup>14</sup> Sensing growing tension between the United States and Nazi Germany, most German-Americans quickly assimilated into American society and culture. However, a small minority, tired of the public demonization of their home culture, intellectually revolted, espousing Nazism as an expression of cultural sovereignty and as a means to advocate against perceived corruption in American capitalism.

However, even Canedy's work fails to address the greater movements at work during the 1930s, and these movements invariably affected the trajectory of the German-American Bund. According to Canedy, the crux of the Bund's appeal stemmed from interwar alienation.<sup>15</sup> The source of this alienation, according to the author, was not the contemporary movements of the Great Depression, but rather the treatment of German-Americans during World War I. American society during the war had pressured Germans to suppress their heritage, and residual tensions, in addition to the success of Hitler overseas, made Germans value the cultural tenets of National Socialism.<sup>16</sup> While her view is not entirely unfounded, Canedy gives an incomplete interpretation of the appeal of American Nazism. Alienation during World War I can only explain radicalism during that immediate period. The majority of the Bund's members, whose age ranged between eighteen and twenty-five, were too young to remember, let alone struggle with, German ethnic alienation twenty years before the peak of the Bund in 1939. The context of the 1930s, consumed by the implications of the Great Depression and increasing suspicion of Nazi Germany, permeated American society. Only the recognition of this context can provide sufficient insight into the growth of the German-American Bund.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

Ultimately, as the Bund faded from tabloids and congressional hearings, so did historians' underlying assumptions surrounding its nature. Early scholarship emphasized the insidious attempt by a foreign entity to infiltrate American democracy. As time passed, however, historians became less concerned with the Bund's ties to Germany and focused more on the social institutions that informed such political thought. This framework has the most potential for future research. While authors such as Canedy have provided an excellent description of the intellectual climate surrounding interwar German immigration and associated propaganda movements, many questions remain. Why did the Bund proliferate during the Great Depression? How did economic trauma strain the ideals of both the friends and enemies of the Bund, and how did their ideologies translate into action? These questions are at the forefront of the debate; to answer them, one must weigh the profound impact of the Great Depression.

## **Chapter One: Nazis in the Roaring Twenties**

Like Hitler's movement overseas, America's Nazis engaged in significant activity long before they entered the national spotlight in the late 1930s. The 1920s served as a crucial decade not only for the harbingers of the German-American Bund, but also for the countries in which these forerunners operated: the Weimar Republic of Germany and the United States of America. This chapter will track the inception of American Nazism during the '20s, and it will situate the Bund's humble beginnings within the historical contexts of both Germany and the United States. Ultimately, American Nazism did not develop in a vacuum, and a thorough analysis of both the American and the German forces that shaped the movement is essential to understanding its early unpopularity. The first predecessor of the German-American Bund, the Teutonia Association, demonstrated a blatant ignorance of the policies and problems that affected Americans during the 1920s, such as post-war disillusion and a popular rejection of foreign ideologies. This inattention to contemporary American political and economic contexts explains the failure of early American Nazism to maintain a consistent following, and became one of the driving forces behind the organization of the German-American Bund in 1936.

As many previous historians have noted, the vast majority of early American Nazis were immigrants from Germany.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, an examination of post-war Germany can help to explain the factors that drove a fraction of Hitler's movement to the United States. Understandably, these immigrants had no understanding of contemporary American politics or social discourse; rather, they came from a country whose post-war

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<sup>17</sup> Joachim Remak, "Friends of the New Germany': The Bund and German-American Relations," *Journal of Modern History* 29 (March 1957): 38-41.; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).; Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (New York: National University Publications, 1973).; Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park: Markgraf Publication Group, 1990).



experience was wildly different from that of the Western Hemisphere. The war had brought both physical and cultural devastation to Germany, and the country that entered the war as a monarchy had emerged as a republic. In 1914, the Great War had promised the formation of a new national identity, one that transcended social class and state borders. Even Kaiser Wilhelm II, who benefitted from such hierarchical conditions, famously stated, "I no longer recognize parties or confessions; today we are all German brothers and only German brothers."<sup>18</sup> At the onset of World War I, Germans of all backgrounds welcomed the conflict with renewed faith in a unified German empire, based on common heritage and national tradition. With the signing of Treaty of Versailles, however, those hopes dissipated into open pessimism. Perhaps no single person expressed this sentiment better than the future *Führer*, Adolf Hitler: "So all had been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations, in vain the starvation and thirst for many endless months, in vain the hours we spent doing our duty, gripped by the fear of death."<sup>19</sup> The war had brought destruction on a scale that humanity had never witnessed before. Germany alone had sustained more than five million deaths. To many Germans, Hitler included, a new empire was worth the destruction of the war, but defeat at the hands of the Triple Entente had rendered such sacrifices meaningless.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the '20s, the aftermath of the war remained a constant reminder of defeat in post-war German society, and as the institution that signed the Treaty of Versailles, the Weimar Republic bore the brunt of the blame. The treaty itself, a

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<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm II, "Zweite Balkonrede des Kaisers, 1. August 1914," in Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Adolf Hitler, *My Battle*, trans. E.T.S. Dugdale (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), 88.

<sup>20</sup> This sentiment was by no means unanimous within Germany. Many groups within German public discourse actively condemned the war from the beginning. One notable example is the left-wing German Social Democratic Party, which held a majority within the Reichstag during WWI. Despite this, the war inspired within Germans of all political colors the belief that the Weimar state had failed to negotiate an equitable end to the war. For more on this, see Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*.

comprehensive and complex document, had three major provisions that provoked disapproval and strife throughout the '20s. The first was Article 27, which mandated the loss of German territorial gains from the war.<sup>21</sup> Permanently stripping Germany of any national sovereignty over Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other colonial territories, the treaty quickly dashed any dreams of imperial German expansion. The second important provision was Part V, Section I, which thoroughly limited Germany's military capabilities.<sup>22</sup> This further inhibited any future imperial action without international approval. Finally, in Article 231, Germany took responsibility for the war "as a consequence of... the aggression of Germany and her allies."<sup>23</sup> Because of this provision, German citizens bore the weight of repaying all costs related to the war for both the victors and the losers, amounting to approximately 269 billion gold marks. If Germany had followed the treaty's payment plan, the country would not have settled its war debts until 1963. While the Weimar Republic did much to avoid these provisions during the late 1920s, the treaty remained an economic obstacle to Germans early in the decade as well as a symbol of German capitulation well after World War I.

Consequently, this post-war social climate affected American Nazism in two important ways. First, these conditions spurred an era of increased migration to the United States. Between 1919 and 1933, approximately 430,000 Germans arrived on American shores.<sup>24</sup> Germans left their home country for a number of reasons. Some left

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<sup>21</sup> "Part II of the Treaty of Versailles," June 28, 1919, in the Avalon Project, Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partii.asp> (accessed January, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> "Part V of the Treaty of Versailles," June 28, 1919, in the Avalon Project, Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partv.asp> (accessed January, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> "Part VII of the Treaty of Versailles," June 28, 1919, in the Avalon Project, Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partvii.asp> (accessed January, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 85.; This number somewhat understates the appeal of American migration to Germans due to the fact that immigration law within the US specifically blocked many Germans from entering the country. A more complete statistical analysis is

because they saw economic opportunity across the Atlantic; others felt that Germany could no longer provide security to their families; However, most German expatriates overwhelmingly expressed a bitter disillusionment with the state of the Weimar Republic and a desire to avoid the post-war tragedy.<sup>25</sup> The second, and probably more important, aspect of post-war Germany was the rise of radical ideology. While historians generally find in this period the beginning of Nazi organization, this radical philosophy was not necessarily embodied in a centralized organization.<sup>26</sup> Of the many German interest groups that claimed to protect the true Nazi cause, only one is specifically relevant to early American Nazism: the *Deutsches Ausland-Institut* (DAI).

The DAI, or German Foreign Institute, played an essential role in the proliferation of early American Nazism. This organization, more than any other, took advantage of the outflow of German emigrants in the 1920s to spread its ideology beyond the borders of Weimar Germany. Most specifically, it targeted Germans leaving for the United States. Headed by Fritz Wertheimer, the DAI initially surfaced as a private wartime propaganda organization with close governmental ties.<sup>27</sup> After the end of the war, the institute survived on private donations until 1922, when the Reichstag approved continuous funding for the organization (much to the chagrin of the left-wing Social

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available in *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Stamford, CT.: Fairfield, 1965), 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 86.

<sup>26</sup> The rise of Nazi Germany competes with the French Revolution as the most prolifically studied period in European history. As distinguished historian Ian Kershaw noted, it is impossible for a single person to read all the scholarship on Adolf Hitler and the rise of the Third Reich in the course of a lifetime. Therefore, while the debate surrounding the rise of Nazi Germany is important and unsettled, it is not the focus of this thesis. Instead, I analyze the German agency that played a role in the genesis of American Nazism, namely the German Foreign Institute. For more on Adolf Hitler and the rise of the Nazi Party, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936, Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998); Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Despite the DAI's largely Nazi overtone during the mid '20s and '30s, it did not begin as a racially charged institution. In fact, with Hitler's growing popularity and its effect on the organization, many board members of Jewish descent resigned out of apprehension about the direction of the institute. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 48.

Democrats).<sup>28</sup> Officially, the purpose of the DAI was to mend foreign ties after the war; however, this effectively spurred a wave of international Nazi propaganda as the ideology became increasingly popular during the '20s. Wertheimer described his mission as such: "It was our hope that the DAI could re-establish economic and cultural ties with the German overseas community and provide some help for those Germans cut off from the homeland because of the Peace Settlement."<sup>29</sup> Underlying Wertheimer's mission was the assumption that all people of German descent were united under a common essence of German exceptionalism. He saw the purpose of the DAI as being to reignite a dormant but inherent German passion.

This racially-charged concept of *Deutschtum*, or Germanness, would prove to be equally a vital and a disastrous governing assumption for the American Nazi movement. Establishing an American organization under the name, the Teutonia Association, members of the DAI quickly realized that with a Germanic population numbering in the millions, the United States harbored one of the greatest concentrations of Aryan blood outside of Europe. By tapping into that supposedly inherent national pride through the use of strategic propaganda, the DAI hoped to stir German-Americans into influencing Washington in favor of a Nazi regime.<sup>30</sup> This task was easier said than done. Much of the German element of America had spent generations separated from Europe, and a large proportion of those individuals were ancestors of Germans who had left their homeland because of religious and social persecution. In fact, a plurality of Americans of German extraction traced their ancestry back to southwestern Germany, a place heavily

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> Fritz Wertheimer, "Das DAI im Jahre 1925," Section T-81, reel 453, folder 5206270, *Records of the National Socialist German Labor Party*.

<sup>30</sup> Copies of DAI handouts and other materials distributed within the United States are available in "Deutschtum im Ausland," Sect. XVI, reel 34, folders 695 and 696, *NSDAP Hauptarchiv Collection*.

populated by Catholics and subject to years of religious strife.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the assumption of Germanness glossed over the generations of political and social experiences that separated Germans from their American relatives, and these obstacles explain the relative unpopularity of '20s Nazism.

As a result, the immigrants who formed the Teutonia Association, the first significant Nazi group on American soil, entered a political context wildly different from that of Germany. Commonly referred to in modern discourse as the Roaring Twenties, the period between 1920 and 1929 was characterized by a political and social dynamism that served as a vibrant illustration of burgeoning American modernism. The influential reformer John Dewey once succinctly reflected on the era: "[N]othing stays long put."<sup>32</sup> Many American intellectuals viewed the '20s as an unprecedented era of modernism, efficiently producing new generations of technology and people. Biblical scholar J. Gresham Machen provided a more descriptive image of his time: "Modern inventions and the industrialism that has been built upon them have given us in many respects a new world to live in; we can no more remove ourselves from that world than we can escape from the atmosphere that we breathe."<sup>33</sup> Intellectuals of the '20s, as many historians have noted, believed that automobiles, telephones, and innovations in mass media such as movies and radio coaxed the denizens of this era out of their "relative isolation and sleepy autonomy" into the new era of urban modernity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1985), 140.

<sup>33</sup> J. Gresham Machen, as quoted in Paul V. Murphy, *The New Era: American Thought and Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 2.

<sup>34</sup> The 1920s remains an important decade for the transition of American culture from Victorian parochialism to the age of jazz. The few pages dedicated to the period in this thesis cannot substitute for the mountains of history and literature that cover the time period. Instead, this paper only analyzes the forces during the '20s that are relevant to the Bund: growing disillusion with international war and the

As was true for Germany, the great symbol that influenced this decade of modernity was the aftermath of World War I. The war was, in the minds of the American public, a grim example of the raw power of modern industrialism. With over four million men drafted into the army between 1917 and 1918, Americans faced the loss of over 50,000 lives in addition to 200,000 wounded veterans--miniscule numbers compared to those sustained by Europe.<sup>35</sup> Still, the American public was well aware of the destruction that occurred overseas. Richard Schmieder, a German college student, provided a firsthand recollection of the devastation wrought by war:

In three days, on a front of about 200 yards, we lost 909 men, and the enemy casualties must have numbered in the thousands. The blue French cloth mingled with the German grey upon the ground, and in some places the bodies were piled so high that one could take cover from shell-fire behind them.... A dog, dying in the poorest hovel at home, is enviable in comparison.<sup>36</sup>

Accounts such as Schmieder's were widely available to readers within the United States and relayed the grim reality of modern warfare.

Unlike the Germans, however, the American people had to grapple with the implications of their victory. World War I had challenged American preconceptions of morality and progress, replacing Wilsonian optimism with a strong disillusion with international politics. In his prophetic essay "The War and the Intellectuals," Randolph Bourne contemplated the "war deliberately made by the intellectuals."<sup>37</sup> By joining the ranks of the war machine, American thinkers, Bourne argued, had abandoned the principles of peace, equality, and progress that informed rational thought: "The American

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popular distrust of foreign agency within the United States. For more on '20s culture, see Paul V. Murphy, *The New Era: American Thought and Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Schmieder, "German Student's War Letter," in Philipp Witkop, *German Students' War Letters*, trans. A. F. Wedd (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1929), 208-209.

<sup>37</sup> Randolph Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," *Seven Arts* (1917), 133.

intellectuals, in their preoccupation with reality, seem to have forgotten that the real enemy is War rather than imperial Germany."<sup>38</sup> Bourne feared that the narrowing separation between thinkers and the state would effectively undermine democracy in the face of the "virtuous horror" of the "war spirit."<sup>39</sup> In the place of an independent intellectual class would stand apologists for the atrocities of wartime governance.

Bourne's observations were not without merit. The United States' short involvement in World War I had bred a massive expansion in the role of government in the lives of Americans. New governmental organizations, such as the War Industries Board, for example, exerted direct control on domestic prices and wages, while other institutions, such as the National Fuel Administration, rationed food, energy, and other essentials.<sup>40</sup> While the government kept its population near subsistence, it sent the resulting surplus overseas to contribute to Europe's bloody stalemate. To influence public opinion during these events, the Wilson Administration created the Committee on Public Information, whose members, such as Pulitzer Prize winner Ernest Poole, shocked Bourne the most. Fearful of the role of propaganda in state manipulation, Bourne concluded, "either support what is going on, in which case you count for nothing because you are swallowed in the mass and great incalculable forces bear you on, or remain aloof, passively resistant, in which case you count for nothing because you are outside the machinery of reality."<sup>41</sup> Because of thinkers like Bourne, Americans throughout the '20s felt a profound inability to affect progress through any meaningful government intervention.

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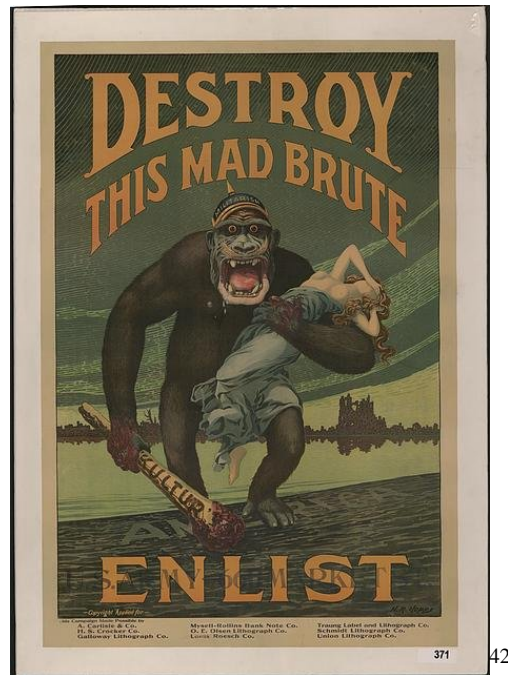
<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Hoover provides a thorough examination of his experiences in both domestic and foreign policy in Herbert Hoover, *America's First Crusade* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942).

<sup>41</sup> Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 143.

This disillusion, along with existing fear of foreign agency, enabled a wave of political reaction in the '20s that profoundly affected the beginning of American Nazism. During the war, the Wilson Administration and the Committee on Public Information (CPI) had mounted a wide-scale propaganda campaign against their German enemies:



Posters such as this are just one example of the CPI's use of images evoking complex race and gender relations to inspire public hatred towards Germans and those of German descent. The committee painted Germans, represented by Kaiser Wilhelm II, as dark and brutal Huns, storming American shores with German *Kultur* to kidnap and rape white women. As a result of this campaign, many German-Americans, even those who publicly denounced the actions of the Triple Alliance, suffered severe alienation during this period. Beyond cultural alienation, however, the Wilson cabinet perpetuated this climate of German suspicion. In 1917, Attorney General Thomas Gregory minted the American

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<sup>42</sup> Harry R. Hopps, "Destroy this mad brute Enlist- U.S.," *Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010652057/> (accessed January 2014).



Protective League (APL) to investigate, on behalf of the Justice Department, the possible presence of German spies within the United States.<sup>43</sup> While the APL failed to produce evidence of even a single German spy on American soil, it facilitated a popular sentiment of distrust against all Americans of German descent.

With the conclusion of the war, this distrust did not dissipate; rather it combined with popular disillusion with the war to form a new era of governmental policy. Flatly rejecting Woodrow Wilson's international campaign for self-determination, American voters of the 1920s preferred a decade of Republican government and a return to "normalcy."<sup>44</sup> Newly-elected President Warren G. Harding quickly demobilized the American wartime economy in favor of unregulated consumer industry and domestic entrepreneurship, while nativist politicians worked diligently in Congress to erect barriers to immigration from various types of immigrants. While legislation such as the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Johnson-Reid Act of 1924 mostly targeted immigrants from southeastern Europe, the 1920s was and has remained the most difficult era in American history for German immigration.<sup>45</sup> The great irony, however, is that all of these barriers could not stop the minority who would ultimately become America's first National Socialists.

It is no surprise, then, that the Teutonia Association failed to engage in any sort of meaningful debate within this context. Founded by Fritz Gissibl, a German national and

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>45</sup> To some degree, this provincialism marked a significant missed opportunity for the American Nazi movement. Throughout the 1920s, racial suspicion and ethnic nativism permeated American political discourse. One example came in the populist resurgence of Ku Klux Klan, whose chauvinism and violent bigotry against Jews, African-Americans, and other ethnic undesirables stood in stark contrast to the isolated actions of the Teutonia Association. Perhaps if Fritz Gissibl and the rest of the DAI noticed this aspect, American Nazism's influence would have grown long before the 1930s. Murphy, *The New Era*, 120.

member of the Nazi-controlled DAI, the Teutonia Association was a Nazi group made by Germans for Germans.<sup>46</sup> Through their intermittent periodical, *Verpost: News of the German Freedom Movement in the United States*, Gissibl, and other notable American Nazis, such as the publication's editor, Walter Kappe, relayed the ideological principles that drove the association.<sup>47</sup> Of primary importance to these individuals, according to the newspaper, was to "tell the truth about Germany," which had been tricked into signing the Treaty of Versailles by a nebulous order of "international Jewry."<sup>48</sup> Mirroring radical political sentiment from Germany, Teutonia made no mention of the social context that concerned Americans. In fact, in one of the later editions of *Verpost*, Gissibl bluntly stated that the role of the Teutonia Association was not to transplant National Socialism to America, but rather, to provide a safe harbor for German nationals while Adolf Hitler, a "real German man," ejected the "outsiders of Jewish Moscow" from the fatherland.<sup>49</sup> Gissibl and other leaders of the American Nazi movement represented a fundamentally German-oriented movement, one that intentionally ignored contemporary American culture in favor of current events occurring back home. Members of Teutonia hoped that by simply reigniting dormant Germanness, they could stir support for Hitler's movement, but that intuition ultimately proved unfruitful. As a result, the Teutonia Association remained a small fringe movement, isolated in metropolitan centers with concentrated German elements. While membership numbers are difficult to estimate, all historians

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<sup>46</sup> Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Kappe remained an essential player in the interwar Nazi movement, reaching the peak of his influence as the editor of the German-American Bund's *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*.

<sup>48</sup> "Deutschum in Ausland," *Vorposten*, Sect. XVI, reel 35, folder 695, *NSDAP Hauptarchiv Collection*.

<sup>49</sup> Fritz Gissibl, "Aufrufan Deutschen in Amerika!" March 30, 1931, in *Ibid*.

agree that Teutonia's population was miniscule, numbering in the hundreds at its peak.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, Gissibl's preconceived notions of Germanness failed to attract sympathizers in the numbers that he and other members of the DAI had predicted.

Considering the Teutonia Association's American audience, it is not difficult to explain why its numbers remained so low. Americans of the '20s, even those of German descent, were not concerned with the struggles of Germany after the Treaty of Versailles. In fact, the increased immigration restrictions, along with the desire to return to political normalcy, suggest that Americans had grown tired of international politics. The war had challenged American preconceptions of morality and progress, and public discourse revolved around those themes. The Teutonia Association's claims of an international judo-communist oligarchy fell on the deaf ears of individuals trying to come to grips with the industrial age of the 1920s. In many ways, Teutonia represented the foreign agency that American provincialists feared most: proponents of a dangerous foreign ideology using propaganda to enter American lands. Ultimately, the German Foreign Institute, Teutonia's source for both funding and propaganda, failed to understand the political reality of the United States; instead, they chose to proceed on false assumptions of Germanness and a unified international Aryan identity. This fact became a hard reality for America's first Nazis, and later iterations of the movement would address the disparity between Nazis' perceptions and contemporary political realities. For the time being, however, American Nazis existed in near-anonymity until another global event could shape their fortunes. That event would be the Great Depression.

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<sup>50</sup> Congress estimated 229 paying members. Sander A. Diamond estimated 500 members based on letters of former Teutonists. See *Investigation of Nazi and other Propaganda*, HR. Doc. 153, 74th Congress, 1st Session, 7.; Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 95.; Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 8.

## **Chapter Two: Transition**

Few periods in United States history have received the same level of scrutiny as the Great Depression. Characterized as an era of bank runs, bread lines, and rampant unemployment, the Great Depression seared into the national ethos a symbol of the apparent consequences of American overconsumption and superficiality. Consequently, this period remains an important era of transition for the United States and the people who lived inside its borders. Traumatized by the economic crash and the implications of poverty for social life, desperate Americans increasingly looked to government and other untraditional sources for aid and comfort. For the majority of the population, this desire manifested in a renewed faith in American liberal reform, represented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal; for a small minority, however, this new Democratic coalition could not address the overarching flaws that radicals perceived in the existing economic system.

As a result, the Great Depression provided the ideal context in which American Nazism could increase both its scope and its appeal. Employing new techniques in propaganda, as well as relaying news of the overseas success of Hitler's Third Reich, the American Nazi movement reinvented itself during some of the most tumultuous years in United States history. In this period, American Nazis began to envision themselves not only as Germans, but also as Americans, who could fix the economic and cultural (i.e., racial) problems that had led to the Great Crash of 1929. Thus, just as political leaders within the United States prepared to transition the country into a new age of liberalism and active government, the American Nazi movement transitioned from foreign agents to a domestic organization, from German émigrés to the German-American Bund.

Because the Great Depression was the single greatest global economic catastrophe in all of human history, its exact magnitude and effects on American life in the 1930s are difficult to over-exaggerate. On one hand, historians can look to the mountains of empirical studies that involve the period, and from this statistical perspective, the immediate effect of the collapse is apparent. Between 1929 and 1933, industrial production within the United States fell by 30%, and consequently, unemployment peaked at 25% of the capable work force.<sup>51</sup> The magnitude of the collapse was so great that the nation's manufacturing industries did not return to the level of output as of June 1928 until November 1936, and the average standard of living did not return to similar levels until 1946.<sup>52</sup> To put these data in perspective, the average individual in 1933 had the same standard of living as one in 1908.

In addition to the virtual halt of industrial production, the Great Depression left the banking system in utter ruin. The stock market crash of 1929, and more importantly, the deflationary policies espoused by the Federal Reserve, led to a reduction in national money stock by 33%, resulting in a nationwide credit crunch.<sup>53</sup> High interest rates and deflationary redistribution of debt quickly evaporated existing deposits within the nation's

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<sup>51</sup> Ben S. Bernanke and Ilian Mihov, "Deflation and Monetary Contraction: An Analysis by Simple Ratios," in Ben S. Bernanke, *Essays on the Great Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>52</sup> Average standard of living is calculated as national consumption (of GDP) divided by population.

<sup>53</sup> A serious point of debate within the field of economic history is the exact causes of the Great Depression, and consequently, the efficiency of the New Deal in mending those ailments. Despite commentary from every inch of the political spectrum, the general consensus from the field of economics is that policies espoused by the Federal Reserve, specifically the decisions to raise discount rates, to reduce circulating money stock, and to return to the gold standard, catalyzed a violent deflationary spiral within the U.S. economy that stunted real investment in physical capital. For more on the subject see Irving Fisher, "The Debt-Deflation Theory of Great Depressions," *Econometrica* 1 (1933): 337-357.; The Nobel Prize winning work, Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States 1867-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).; Christina Romer, "The Nation in Depression," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (1993): 19-40. Econometric analyses are available in Bernanke, *Essays on the Great Depression*.

struggling banking institutions.<sup>54</sup> Cognizant of the financial problems plaguing banks, average depositors rushed to their local branch in the infamous bank runs, only to discover that entire life savings had disappeared overnight. Unsurprisingly, these smaller so-called unit banks, incapable of paying off growing lines of debt, failed in rapid succession during this period. Between 1929 and 1933, over one-third of domestic banks closed their doors, taking a large sum of the nation's savings with them.<sup>55</sup>

A statistical analysis of the Great Depression, however, only provides a limited representation of the complete effect of the crash on national character. Thus, historians often look to the social and political context of the '30s to paint a more vivid picture. A common tendency among both intellectual and popular culture in the 1930s was to interpret the Great Crash as proof of the folly of unbridled *laissez-faire* capitalism. Popular historian Frederick Lewis Allen, reflected on the 1920s as a period of hubris, when the ambitions of the business class were destined to collapse:

That enormous confidence in Coolidge Prosperity which had lifted the business man to a new preeminence in American life and had persuaded innumerable men and women to gamble their savings away... had also carried the price of common stocks far upward since 1924, until they had reached what many hard-headed financiers considered alarming levels.<sup>56</sup>

Contending that a "speculative fever" had taken hold of the American populace, Allen saw the lure of instant gratification inhibit what he considered to be rational temperance: "It was all so easy. The gateway to fortune stood wide open."<sup>57</sup> This euphoria, according to Allen, could not last forever. On October 24, 1929, stock prices began to fall, and they did not stop until July of 1932. Allen observed a variety of intellectuals, ranging from

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<sup>54</sup> Friedman and Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States 1867-1960*, 302.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>56</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931), 290.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 291-311.

political scientists to sociologists to economists, scramble to explain the underlying principles behind the crash, but Allen offered his own opinion: "The gigantic edifice of prices was honeycombed with speculative credit and was now breaking under its own weight."<sup>58</sup> This speculation, according to Allen, catalyzed a chain reaction of selling that resulted in the stock market crash and consequently the Great Depression. While most modern social scientists would likely disagree with this assertion, Allen's analysis is important because it reflected broad contemporary perceptions about the nature of liberal capitalism and the dangers associated with a self-interested, speculative society.

Outside of academia, popular opinion of the Great Depression mobilized behind the government to correct perceived problems with '20s entrepreneurship. Much of the early hopes for recovery revolved around the short-lived influence of the commander-in-chief, President Herbert Hoover. When Hoover entered office in March of 1929, journalists and voters alike rejoiced at the elevation of this avatar of the modern temper to the head of state. Anna O'Hare McCormick of the *New York Times* stated, "We had summoned a great engineer to solve our problems for us; now we sat back comfortably and confidently to watch the problems being solved."<sup>59</sup> Coming to national prominence as the head of the U.S. Food Administration in World War I, Hoover had a reputation as the "modern technical mind," capable of "genius" if given the right opportunity.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, as the depression worsened, Hoover failed to meet those expectations.

President Hoover, as a leader and progressive reformer, took several aggressive but ultimately ineffective measures to combat the symptoms of the Great Depression. Informed by his Quaker notions of "progressive individualism," Hoover on one hand

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>59</sup> Anne O'Hare McCormick, "A Year of the Hoover Method," *New York Times*, March 2, 1930.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

desired to lead the country out of the Great Depression, but at the same time, wished to do so without upsetting the nation's heritage of republicanism and personal liberty.<sup>61</sup> Addressing a crowd of Iowans in 1925, Hoover stated that he believed "every time we find a solution outside of government we have not only strengthened character but we have preserved our sense of real self-government."<sup>62</sup> Hoover had a profound, albeit slightly unfounded, faith in the hardiness of the American people. As a result, the Hoover administration promoted policy that emphasized industrial cooperation, private donation, and federal fact-finding commissions. This, however, did not mean that Hoover opposed all forms of federal intervention. By the end of Hoover's presidency, the national debt had increased to \$2.7 billion, which accounted for 60% of all federal expenditures.<sup>63</sup> Not even Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal would reach a larger proportional debt.

This bounce in federal spending went to a variety of programs aimed at repairing the Great Depression. To address the ongoing banking crisis, Hoover signed off on the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) in January of 1932.<sup>64</sup> With over \$2 billion at its disposal, the RFC loaned emergency funds to a variety of private institutions, such as banks, railroads, and agricultural corporations. Other policies included \$100 million to the Federal Farm Board for agricultural subsidies, as well as labor protections in the form of the Norris-LaGuardia Act and the Davis-Bacon Act, which banned yellow dog

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert Hoover, as quoted in Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1975), 6.

<sup>62</sup> Herbert Hoover, in *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>63</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79. In fact, the deficit continued to increase even after the Revenue Act of 1932, which raised taxes.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.



contracts and enforced a minimal wage, respectively.<sup>65</sup> Despite these various attempts at economic relief, they failed to have any substantive impact.

As a result, the federal government's solutions did little to help the country's most extreme political groups, which included American Nazis. Similar to the rest of the country, members of the Teutonia Association struggled to maintain economic solvency between 1929 and 1933. One member reflected on the period: "If the *Führer* were to see the state of the movement, he would have most certainly cried."<sup>66</sup> Overwhelmed by economic hardship and political competition, the Teutonia Association existed in utter disarray. By 1932, the majority of its members, based out of Detroit and New York City, were unemployed, and many had decided to conserve resources by living together.<sup>67</sup> Participation had consequently dwindled because those who could afford to remain active had to do so entirely without monetary compensation.<sup>68</sup> On top of financial hardship, Teutonia faced competition from other organizations. In May 1931, the German NSDAP, over the objections of the German Foreign Institute (DAI), established an official New York branch of the NSDAP named Gau-USA, which absorbed a significant number of Teutonists.<sup>69</sup> For six months, Fritz Gissibl lobbied Germany for official support, until he decided to capitulate and join the official domestic Nazi unit.

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<sup>65</sup> A more detailed overview of Hoover's policies can be found in Jim Powell, "What Did FDR Borrow from Hoover?" in *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and his New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003). A common misconception about Hoover is that he was a tight-fisted fiscal conservative. In reality, his policies became extremely influential during the New Deal. Rex Tugwell, a Columbia economist and influential Brain Truster once said, "Practically the whole New Deal was extrapolated from programs that Hoover started."

<sup>66</sup> Heinz Spanknöbel to Kamderadshaft-USA, March 11, 1939, Section T-81, reel 139, folder 176387, *Records of the National Socialist German Labor Party*.

<sup>67</sup> Karl Neumann to Rolf Hoffman, January 23, 1934, Section T-81, reel 27, 24505-8 in *Ibid*.

<sup>68</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 100. Diamond estimated that the largest pro-Nazi rally during the worst years of the Depression only hosted 45 participants,

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Gau-USA's brief existence proved to be no more successful than its predecessor. One historian commented: "Had Hitler not come to power in the following year, the American unit of the NSDAP would have undoubtedly collapsed."<sup>70</sup> Gau-USA faced many of the same problems that had conquered the Teutonia Association, but this organization had a few defining attributes. First, the movement attracted the participation of several transformative leaders. In addition to Fritz Gissibl, Gau-USA saw the entrance of Walter Kappe, an effective writer and propagandist; Heinz Spanknöbel, the impetuous and ambitious head of the Detroit NSDAP unit; and finally, Fritz Julius Kuhn, the future leader of the German-American Bund.<sup>71</sup> A war veteran and former member of the infamous German *Freikorps*, Kuhn immigrated to the United States in 1928 through Mexico.<sup>72</sup> Gaining employment in Detroit as a chemical engineer for Ford Motors, Kuhn informally attended Gau meetings until 1934, when he became a full-fledged member as well as a naturalized American citizen.<sup>73</sup> However, more important than Kuhn, for the time being, was the expanding influence of Heinz Spanknöbel.

Spanknöbel, a German national who immigrated to the United States in 1929, capitalized on the chaos of the Great Depression to transition the American Nazi movement from an extension of Nazi Germany's propaganda machine to a genuine American group, concerned with political life within the United States. After Hitler came to power in January of 1933, Spanknöbel mobilized the Detroit unit of Gau-USA to address the changing power structure within Germany. Renaming his district *Bund der*

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (New York: National University Publications, 1973), 8.

<sup>72</sup> Arnie Bernstein, *Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 16-19.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 31.

*Freunde des Neuen Deutschland*, or Friends of the New Germany, Spanknöbel led a campaign to centralize the American Nazi movement under his leadership.<sup>74</sup> This iteration of National Socialism was unique because the leadership realized it must tailor its policy to the "special conditions in the USA."<sup>75</sup> Spanknöbel acknowledged that mobilization required reaching beyond the imported rhetoric of Nazi Germany; the burgeoning movement needed to attract non-German nationals, and it needed to address the popular discourse surrounding the Great Depression.

Thus, Spanknöbel reorganized the American Nazi movement to better reflect contemporary American issues. Taking command of the Friends of the New Germany, Spanknöbel incorporated the remnants of Gau-USA into a highly militaristic social structure. Placing himself at the top of the hierarchy as *Bundesleiter*, Spanknöbel divided the organization into three districts, or *Gaues*, an archaic, racially-charged German term. This organization is critically important because Fritz Kuhn would later mimic this structure during his leadership of the German-American Bund. For the time being, however, each district was divided on the basis of geography and had individual *Gauleiters* to organize activities: Robert Pape headed the Western district in Los Angeles, Fritz Gissibl directed the Midwestern district in Chicago, and the Eastern district fell under Hans Stolzenburg's command in New York City.<sup>76</sup> Underlying this organization was a common Nazi principle known as the *Führerprinzip*, or leadership principle.<sup>77</sup> This rule entailed that in order protect the integrity of *Deutschtum*, the leader of the

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<sup>74</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 113.

<sup>75</sup> Heinz Spanknöbel to Rolf Hoffman, Sept. 1933, Section T-81, reel 27, folder 23988, *Records of the National Socialist German Labor Party*.

<sup>76</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park: Markgraf Publication Group, 1990), 76.

Friends of the New Germany maintained complete and absolute authority over its members. Under this new militaristic chain-of-command, Spanköbel, who theoretically answered only to Adolf Hitler, proceeded on a mission to "clean up" the United States from its "Jewish influence."<sup>78</sup>

As a result, between 1933 and 1935, the Friends of the New Germany played an active, albeit often forgotten role, in Depression-era American politics. This is not to say that they engaged in traditional American electioneering. The Friends still targeted the *Deutschtum* of German-America, but they did so with the intent of effecting permanent political reform within the United States. Through its new periodical, *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, as well as several other smaller publications, the Friends of the New Germany expressed what it perceived to be key problems with the American system.<sup>79</sup> Of paramount importance to these American Nazis was ridding the country of ubiquitous Jewish and Communist forces, which had allegedly caused the Great Depression. To the Friends, the most prominent representative of these nebulous forces was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Carrying forty-two states and 472 electoral votes in the presidential election of 1932, Roosevelt entered office in March of 1933 with a mandate for liberal reform that would ideally correct the overly speculative nature of American capitalism.<sup>80</sup> His first one hundred days of power did not disappoint his constituents. Between March and May of 1933, the federal government had instituted a nationwide Bank Holiday, raised taxes to an unprecedented level, nationalized the private supply of

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<sup>78</sup> Heinz Spanknöbel, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>79</sup> *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, or *German Wake-up Call and Observer* was published from 1934 to 1941 by the German Consumer League, an off-shoot organization of the Friends. Eventually, the paper was inherited by the German-American Bund, and Walter Kappe remained an effective editor-in-chief for a majority of the periodical's distribution.

<sup>80</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 287.

gold, and instituted substantial regulations on both agricultural and industrial production.<sup>81</sup> With the help of his informal Brain Trust, Roosevelt enacted a series of policies (of questionable constitutionality) that dramatically changed the relationship between the individual and the state.

The Friends of the New Germany depicted the early implementation of the New Deal as the harbinger of a judeo-communist regime. Edmund Fürholzer, a member of the Friends and employee of the Republican Foreign Language Bureau, called Roosevelt the "new Wilson," a second incarnation of the man who "utterly ruined Germany- with the result that they ruined the whole world."<sup>82</sup> By connecting Roosevelt to Wilson and Wilson to World War I, Fürholzer argued that Roosevelt represented the same forces that had brought the country to economic collapse in the first place.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Fürholzer described the Democratic Party as being moved entirely by "a pathological hatred for anything German," implementing communist policy in an attempt to disrupt the sound German-American elements of the country.<sup>84</sup> This sentiment only echoed articles commonly found within the Friends' newspaper, which lamented the onslaught of "bolshevist activities in Uncle Sam's preserves."<sup>85</sup> These activities, according to the periodical, stemmed from the "occupant of the White House" whose deliberately "anti-German resolutions" permitted "resentful Jews... to shine as champions of liberty."<sup>86</sup> Articles such as this clearly emphasized common German race as the basis for political

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<sup>81</sup> A rigorous analysis of the First One Hundred days can be found in Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>82</sup> Edmund Fürholzer, "Warum stimmen wir Bürger deutschen Stammes wiederum für Herbert Hoover," Section T-81, reel 187, folder 336715-23.

<sup>83</sup> Fürholzer alluded to a common economic theory within the United States which argued that pent-up consumption for World War I prompted the speculative society of the 1920s. This notion carried some weight within political discourse.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "Behind the Curtain," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, August 9, 1935.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

change. As a result, enthusiastic members of the Friends of the New Germany perceived Roosevelt and his policies as an insidious attempt by Jewish forces to undermine the essential Germanness of National Socialism.

At the same time, the Friends relayed information about the success of Adolf Hitler overseas to potential American Nazis. Doug Brinkley, a writer for *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, relayed his experience of Nazi Germany in 1935 to an English-speaking audience: "Hitler is now the most beloved man of the German people who have joyfully accepted his leadership."<sup>87</sup> Brinkley painted Germany as a world where the problems of the Great Depression had ceased to exist. Citing Germany's official employment data, Brinkley concluded that "[t]he unemployed now stand at a figure of 1,800,000," indicating a general "improvement in the internal economic conditions."<sup>88</sup> Brinkley implied that the solutions of National Socialism surpassed those of the Roosevelt administration, leading to a healthier German nation. But more important than anything else, according to Brinkley, was "the fact that in present day Germany every man is on a footing of equality with one another."<sup>89</sup> Brinkley described a context where the introduction of National Socialism could easily solve the contemporary problems of the United States, bringing the ideology's appeal to a domestic audience.<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, these changes in party structure and rhetoric catapulted the American Nazi movement to far greater recognition within American political discourse, and this recognition came with additional costs and benefits. The most important benefit of these changes was an immediate burst in membership and Nazi activity. Between 1933 and

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<sup>87</sup> Doug Brinkley, "My Impressions of 1935 Germany," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, August 9, 1935.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> A more extensive discussion of the domestic appeal of National Socialism appears in Chapter 3.

1935, paying membership increased by an order of magnitude, from approximately five hundred members in Gau-USA to six thousand at the peak of the Friends of the New Germany.<sup>91</sup> While this number never had the political sway to determine serious legislative outcomes, the increase in membership indicates a sharp transition from the isolated activities of the Teutonia Association in the 1920s to the Friends' commitment to life within the United States. Instead of engaging in the small beer-hall discussions of the early Nazi movement, the Friends often took to metropolitan streets to march under the swastika flag of the Third Reich.<sup>92</sup> The American Nazi movement desired greater participation within their country and mobilized accordingly.

Because of this, however, greater public opposition hindered burgeoning Nazi activism; this ultimately led to the dissipation of the Friends of the New Germany and cleared the way for the German-American Bund. Participating in loud marches and articulating vehemently anti-Semitic ideology, the Friends immediately attracted adverse attention from outsiders. This eventually prompted the involvement of Congressman Samuel Dickstein, a New Yorker of Jewish descent and the greatest opponent of the American Nazi movement.<sup>93</sup> As Chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, Congressman Dickstein had requested the deportation of Heinz Spanknöbel as early as October 1933. While that attempt failed, Dickstein used his influence to at least conduct a federal investigation into the extent of Nazi influence on American soil.

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<sup>91</sup> Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma*, 51.

<sup>92</sup> One such march in upstate New York was depicted in great detail in the Friends' newspaper. See "Bilder vom ersten Sommertest auf 'Camp Siegfried,'" *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, August 30, 1935.

<sup>93</sup> Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma*, 53.

The resulting Special Committee on Un-American Activities, also known as the McCormack-Dickstein Committee,<sup>94</sup> condemned the growth of Nazism on American shores. Characterizing the Friends as the result of "unrest, discontent with the existing order, and a wide-spread agitation," the committee produced a report that described the "devious methods" employed by American Nazis:

The membership list of the "Friends of the New Germany" showed a large number of aliens who, although they have resided in this country for years, had never made any effort to obtain their first papers to become citizens. Yet, these self-same aliens sought to dictate to American citizens and find fault with the American philosophy of government.<sup>95</sup>

Of chief concern to the committee was the foreign influence of Nazism penetrating American society to corrupt democratic principles. To some degree the congressmen made a valid point. As the official American cell of the NSDAP, the Friends of the New Germany, as well as its predecessors, had well-documented ties to the Third Reich.<sup>96</sup> Much of its propaganda came from the DAI and other agencies. In addition, Spanknöbel, Gissibl, and other leaders maintained regular communications with organizers across the Atlantic. The Friends' leadership quickly realized that with growing adverse attention, if the organization was to maintain their substantial growth, they would have to hasten the Americanization of the group.

As a result, Heinz Spanknöbel yet again reorganized the American Nazi movement. Similar to the transition from Gau-USA to the Friends, Spanknöbel wished to promote American issues within the Nazi movement. The most important result of this sentiment was a change of leadership. In the fall of 1935, Spanknöbel stepped down as

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<sup>94</sup> Named after its chairman, John William McCormack of Massachusetts, and its vice chairman, Samuel Dickstein of New York. This committee is the precursor to the infamous House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which will play a greater role with the German-American Bund.

<sup>95</sup> *Investigation of Nazi and other Propaganda*, HR. Doc. 153, 74th Congress, 1st Session, 2-7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



*Bundesleiter* in favor of Fritz Gissibl, former leader of the Teutonia Association, *Gauleiter* of the Midwestern District, and American citizen since 1934.<sup>97</sup> Spanknöbel, who intended to remain the *de facto* leader of the movement, relied on his long-time friend, Gissibl, to promote favorable Nazi activity while providing an American face to the Friends. In his place as Midwestern *Gauleiter*, Gissibl appointed Fritz Kuhn, who proved himself to be an effective speech-maker and organizer in Detroit.<sup>98</sup> However, this dynamic was never tested.

Ultimately, Spanknöbel's actions garnered greater scrutiny from opponents, resulting in the dissolution of his organization. Beyond replacing leadership, he lobbied other German immigrant organizations for support. His greatest political blunder, called "The Spanknöbel Affair," occurred in September of 1935 when the former *Bundesleiter* stormed the offices of a popular German-American newspaper, *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herald*. Literally waving his communications with German officials overhead, Spanknöbel invoked the name of the *Führer* to demand that the periodical print pro-Hitler material.<sup>99</sup> Editors at the newspaper promptly called the police and forcibly ejected Spanknöbel from the building. As a result, this story rife with rumors of Nazi infiltration, ignited a media storm in its wake. Congressman Dickstein, taking advantage of the scandal, organized a federal grand jury to issue a warrant for Spanknöbel's arrest on November 2; however, Spanknöbel had secretly left the country four days earlier to head back to Germany, taking the organizational center of the Friends with him.<sup>100</sup> For

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<sup>97</sup> Arnie Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> The Friends' newspaper soon filled with articles praising the war record of Kuhn. An example can be found in "Fritz Kuhn, Gauleiter Mittelwest: Ortsgruppenleiter von Detroit, Mich.," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, September 26, 1935.

<sup>99</sup> Arnie Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 27.

<sup>100</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, 124. The official charge was the presence of an unregistered agent of a foreign government.

German officials, this incident was the final straw. As dictator, Hitler and his close advisors were in the process of war-planning, and the last thing they wanted was to strain Germany's already tense relationship with the United States. Consequently, Hitler personally ordered the dissolution of the Friends of the New Germany on October 11, 1935.<sup>101</sup> More specifically, Hitler ordered all German nationals to cease participation in the group, and with immigrants constituting over 60% of the membership, this command was an effective death sentence. Spanknöbel had left a power vacuum within the American Nazi movement, and once again, it plunged into turmoil, only to resurface several months later as the German-American Bund.

To summarize, the Great Depression was a game-changing event. The economic shock had inspired in the country a rejection of popular notions of American liberalism, and through broad financial instability, the country had descended into chaos. Not even the brightest contemporary minds, such as Herbert Hoover, could address what appeared to be overarching flaws in the American capitalist system. As a result, during the 1930s, individuals increasingly looked to radical solutions to economic problems. In this context, the American Nazi movement began to grow. Like the rest of the country, Nazi organizations struggled to survive, but a few clever individuals, such as Heinz Spanknöbel, took advantage of the chaos of the Great Depression to expand the influence and power of American Nazism. Leading American Nazis reorganized the movement to better represent American concerns, and surprised observers saw that these changes worked. Although plagued by internal chaos and external condemnation, Nazism continued to grow and membership skyrocketed. Out of the turmoil emerged the German-American Bund, ready to address the perceived flaws in the American system.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 191-192.; Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 65.; Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 15.

### **Chapter Three: The Bund**

By 1935, the Friends of the New Germany appeared to have been all but destroyed. Subject to public condemnation from both Adolf Hitler and the United States federal government, and having suffered the ousting of its influential leader, Heinz Spanknöbel, the American Nazi movement was left surrounded by enemies of both American and German extraction. Surprisingly, out of this chaos sprang the German-American Bund, whose leader, Fritz Kuhn, would finish the mission that his predecessors began: to develop a National Socialist movement on American soil. Previous historians have rigorously studied the rise of Fritz Kuhn and his governing philosophy, and while this thesis will provide a brief overview of his transition from *Gauleiter Mittelwest* to the American *Führer*, Kuhn is not this chapter's main focus. Rather, this chapter will explain the appeal of the Bund to American citizens and it will situate this group within existing histories concerning the nature of Depression-era radicalism. Even after Hitler's public condemnation of American Nazis, the movement continued to grow, and traditional explanations (as explored in this thesis's historiography) have failed to account for this discrepancy. Ultimately, historians must realize that a small minority of Americans joined the German-American Bund because they deliberately desired the ideology of Nazism and because the political leanings of the Bund promised to ease their contemporary problems.

As such, this chapter, through extensive analysis of typical members, offers an explanation for the unlikely rise of the Bund. The Great Depression inspired in a small number of German-Americans not only severe economic trauma, but also a sentiment of cultural alienation. Looking for value in their social and ancestral heritage, these

individuals turned to the German-American Bund, a vehemently radical group, to ease their cultural and economic angst. Primary evidence drawn from archival research and literary works, suggests that Nazi ideology and practice provided both economic and cultural fulfillment to German-Americans, leading to the proliferation of the increasingly relevant Bund.

With the loss of Heinz Spanknöbel in late 1935, his successor, Fritz Gissibl, scrambled to protect himself in the wake of Hitler's formal abandonment. Realizing that he was the federal government's next target, Gissibl hastily appointed a new *Bundesleiter* before returning to Germany. After a short period of contemplation, in December of 1935 Gissibl ultimately chose the head of the Midwestern district, Fritz Julius Kuhn.<sup>102</sup> Despite Kuhn's uninspiring appearance—he was a man of thick waist and thick-rimmed glasses who spoke with a thick Bavarian accent-- this American citizen thoroughly demonstrated his organizational aptitude during his time as the leader of the Detroit unit of the Friends of the New Germany. By the fall of 1935, American Nazi periodicals praised Kuhn's ability to maintain order under his command. They specifically noted that no other unit took such care in personal appearance and decorum, as exemplified by the group's constant dress in formal military-style jackets, pressed brown pants, medals distinguishing the chain of command, and black leather Sam Browne belts; all of which were reminiscent of the German Brown Shirts (SA) overseas.<sup>103</sup> Equally important was the fact that Kuhn could attract attendance from native-born Americans, giving him an edge to expand the appeal of the increasingly Americanized group. Gissibl had little time

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<sup>102</sup> Arnie Bernstein, *Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>103</sup> "Fritz Kuhn, Gauleiter Mittelwest," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, September 26, 1935.; "Deutscher Volkstag der Ortsgruppe Detroit," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, September 26, 1935.

to mull over his choice of applicants but still hoped to salvage eleven years of hard work. Realizing that no other member could lead as effectively as Kuhn, Gissibl officially appointed Kuhn to the highest level of the organization. Gissibl soon thereafter escaped the United States to a fruitful position within the fully-Nazified German Foreign Institute (DAI), where he remained throughout World War II.<sup>104</sup> With the official endorsement of the remnants of the Friends of the New Germany, Kuhn moved to expand the group's influence.

Kuhn's first order of business was to centralize his existing power. Under the *führerprinzip*, the Friends' strict chain of command, Gissibl's support was all Kuhn needed to wield official authority. But the new leader, cognizant of the problems that had plagued the Teutonia Association and Gau-USA, wanted to ensure that competition could never challenge his popularity. As a result, Kuhn called a national convention in Buffalo, New York to vote on several issues relating to the future of the American Nazi movement. A precise description of the election was circulated through the Friends' newspaper *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*. Issues to be decided included the election of a leader, and votes on whether to change that leader's official title from *Bundesleiter* to *Bundesführer*, and whether to change the name of the organization from "*Freunde des Neuen Detuschland*" to "*Amerikadeutscher Volksbund*," or the German-American Bund.<sup>105</sup> The mission of the group, as dictated by Kuhn, was to bring pro-German, pro-American justice back to the United States, which had been traumatized

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 193.

<sup>105</sup> ""Freunde des Neuen Deutschland" jetzt: "Amerikadeutscher Volksbund,"" *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, April 2, 1936. A direct translation of *Amerikadeutscher Volksbund* is the "American German People's League." Often, members shortened this to the German American League; even more often, they would simply call it the German-American Bund.

both culturally and economically by the Great Depression: "Be it resolved, that we consider it our most sacred duty to combat this Moscow-directed Madness with every legal means at our disposal."<sup>106</sup> By calling this rally, Kuhn wished to accomplish two things: first, he desired to emulate Adolf Hitler, who had also come to power through democratic elections; second, he wanted to prove to outsiders that his organization was legal and dedicated to serious political reform.

The resulting convention was an unconditional success, attracting thousands of participants, most of whom were American citizens dressed in full Nazi regalia. The election confirmed Kuhn's position as *Bundesführer*, and all of his other initiatives passed with overwhelming majorities.<sup>107</sup> Taking the podium within Buffalo's Hotel Statler, surrounded by a vibrant mix of swastikas and American flags, Kuhn addressed his followers with utter certainty of the legitimacy of his power. His speech emphasized notions that he would later publish in his influential pamphlet *Awake and Act!*:

As an organization of American citizens, [the Bund] proposes to take an active part in the affairs of the country while complying unqualifiedly with its duties to the United States. We shall educate the American people to become friends of the New Germany. As American citizens [we shall] advance our political interests [and] defend our native land against lies and slander.<sup>108</sup>

Kuhn presented the Bund as an institution entirely dedicated to radical domestic change. By appealing to that greater political mandate, Kuhn solidified his leadership of the newly formed German-American Bund.

In the face of this final transition from Friends of the New Germany to the German-American Bund, official membership skyrocketed. While surviving records do

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<sup>106</sup> Fritz Kuhn, "A Resolution," *Detuscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, April 2, 1936.

<sup>107</sup> Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 48.

<sup>108</sup> Fritz Kuhn, *Awake and Act!*, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 49.

not reveal precise membership statistics, Kuhn placed official numbers at 8,299 in a report to the FBI in 1939.<sup>109</sup> Yet even Kuhn's estimates fluctuated with the political climate. In other situations, such as before the House Committee of Un-American Activities he placed membership at well beyond 20,000 individuals. The *New York Times* listed membership at about 10,000.<sup>110</sup> The exact number is difficult to determine, but what is certain is the fact that the influence of American Nazism was steadily expanding.

Beyond quantitative increases in membership, the Bund had also experienced qualitative demographic changes. No longer was this organization restricted to close-knit circles of German nationals. These individuals were full-fledged American citizens: some naturalized and some native born, but all having substantial ties to life within the United States. In fact, Kuhn explicitly banned all participation by non-American citizens, although some German nationals could donate extra money to the cause through the Prospective Citizens League, a small off-shoot of the Bund.<sup>111</sup> Still, despite Hitler's formal abandonment of the American Nazi movement, the Bund remained forceful, and American citizens from across the country flocked to its rallies and its ideology.

Why Americans decided to join this group is an important question left largely untouched by previous historians. Essential to answering this question is an understanding of the lives of typical Bund members who supported the extreme beliefs of Fritz Kuhn with nearly religious fervor. But before the interests of Bundists are

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<sup>109</sup> The House Committee on Un-American Activities believed that at its height, the Bund could produce 5,000 storm troopers, ready for combat. See *Investigation of Un-American Activities and Propaganda*, 76th Congress, 1st Session, 1939, 92.; See also Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park: Markgraf Publication Group, 1990), 86.

<sup>110</sup> *New York Times*, 17 August 1939.

<sup>111</sup> "Bund Command 3, 30 October 1936," in Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 84-85.

explained in greater detail, a broad discussion of Depression-era American radicalism is critical to an understanding of the context in which these individuals operated. The Great Depression, filled with economic and political uncertainty, challenged all Americans' notions of private enterprise and identity, and as a result, individuals of all backgrounds looked to untraditional sources for fulfillment. On the left, the American Communist Party saw membership rise from 30,000 in 1919 to a peak of nearly 100,000 during the mid-1930s.<sup>112</sup> Like the German-American Bund on the right, the communist element in the United States never had enough popular support to effect substantive policy change, but nonetheless, its growth indicates an increased appeal of political radicalism on American shores. Surprisingly enough, however, some leftists, who abandoned the violent rhetoric of Communism, made significant contributions to public policy. Rexford G. Tugwell, one of the founding members of President Roosevelt's famous Brain Trust, played an essential role in the formation of the New Deal.<sup>113</sup> While not a socialist himself, Tugwell utilized his position as assistant secretary of Agriculture to increase the government's involvement in the day-to-day lives of private individuals. His policies, including the ill-fated Agricultural Adjustment Act, represented a political shift of the country to the left, where the common society revolved around progressive notions embedded in the New Deal. On the state and local level, left-wing political figures ascended to power by tapping into rampant economic distress. The best example was

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>113</sup> Reflecting on a trip to the Soviet Union, Tugwell once stated in his book *American Economic Life and the Means of its Improvement* (1928) that the country "appears to produce goods in greater quantities... and to spread such prosperity as there is over wider areas of the population." At the same time, however, he observed "a disregard for liberties and rights" under the Soviet dictatorship. Like many leftists of the time, he saw value in government oversight, but expressed a desire for classical liberal rights. See Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and his New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 15.; Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 60.



Louisiana Governor, and later Senator, Huey Long. Until his assassination in 1935, Long, or "the Kingfish" as he liked to call himself, amassed nearly totalitarian power over the state of Louisiana.<sup>114</sup> Battling what he considered the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few elite bankers, Long used his overwhelming popularity to pass bills setting unprecedented levels of public spending and corporate taxation, as well as state-level anti-trust measures, that far overshadowed public emergency actions in other states.<sup>115</sup> When questioned about the legality of his policies, he once brazenly responded, "I'm the Constitution here now."<sup>116</sup> Like Tugwell and the Communist Party, Long represented a greater gravitation of the country towards the left.

On the right, however, fascist movements of all kinds sprouted in response to the economic decline. Lawrence Dennis, a former child evangelist and diplomat, and a popular writer in the thirties, in *The Coming American Fascism* provided the most coherent image of a distinctly American fascist regime, one that rested on notions of economic utilitarianism. Discarding traditional views of American republican government and individual liberty, Dennis in 1936 concluded that the basis for government does not rest on esoteric principles, but rather on practicality: "If it works, it survives, and if it survives, it works."<sup>117</sup> The Great Depression, according to Dennis, had thoroughly debunked the workability of the American political and economic system, and with widespread poverty and desperation, the country had to reinvent itself in order to persist in modernity. The answer, Dennis argued, was "state absolutism."<sup>118</sup> Dennis

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<sup>114</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 9.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Huey Long, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>117</sup> Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 13.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

stated that "an ideal fascism for America must provide for maximum production and consumption with a steady rise in living standards... all without either a class or civil war."<sup>119</sup> According to Dennis, fascism was not a principled approach in itself, but rather a utilitarian attempt at providing the best economic returns. This end, Dennis concluded, would result from "national economic planning" and "the processes of education, indoctrination, and inculcation of right attitudes," thus cultivating "good citizens."<sup>120</sup> Dennis presented a vision for a broad national government, where financial elites would unilaterally dictate the future of the economy while at the same time disseminating propaganda to influence mobilization. As such, Dennis argued for fascism on the basis of economic efficiency.

Another right-wing radical, Father Charles Coughlin, expressed increasing dissatisfaction with Depression-era politics. Initially a supporter of the New Deal, this Catholic priest became increasingly radical as he became convinced that President Roosevelt was too soft on Communism. Mirroring Roosevelt's famous fireside chats, Coughlin produced weekly radio sermons in which he passionately explained the need for a variety of policies, ranging from gold-revaluations to the monetization of silver to the complete nationalization of the country's banking-and-currency system, all in the name of curbing the nation's "predatory capitalism."<sup>121</sup> Campaigning against all forms of communism, socialism, and other apparently pernicious political theories, Coughlin's rhetoric demonstrated a common contradiction within radical conservative thought during the Depression: "[T]he most dangerous communist is the wolf in the sheep's clothing of conservatism who is bent on preserving the policies of greed, of oppression and of

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Coughlin, as quoted in Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 95-113

Christlessness."<sup>122</sup> On one hand, Coughlin detested the economic and social problems present within the United States during the 1930s, but on the other hand, he remained equally fearful of vague international communist conspiracies, which ideally promised to fix such inequality. Unlike most other conservative radicals, however, Coughlin took this invective one step further, by intertwining his rhetoric with harsh anti-Semitism. For example, by 1938, Coughlin encouraged his supporters to organize under militaristic platoons of his newly established Christian Front, determined to eliminate "communistic Jews."<sup>123</sup> Anti-Semitism served as the rhetorical glue that held Coughlin's philosophy together. He presented his policies as a singular effort against one common enemy: orchestrated international Jewry. So deep was this feeling that Coughlin even praised Hitler's policies for reigniting within Germany a national, Christian unity.<sup>124</sup> Unsurprisingly, none of this could stem his increasing troubles with the federal government. As entrance into World War II became inevitable, Coughlin found himself more and more at odds with federal regulations and censorship, a problem that would also plague the German-American Bund. In 1942, under severe pressure from the Justice Department and the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, Coughlin unwillingly ceased all written publications and radio broadcasts, fading into obscurity.

While the Great Depression entailed a variety of new forms of totalitarian thought, it should still be noted that radicalism was the exception rather than the rule. Sociologists Helen and Robert S. Lynd demonstrated as much in their 1937 case study, *Middletown in Transition*, the sequel to their monumental work, *Middletown* (1929). Hoping to quantify the distress that they observed from across the country, the Lynds

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<sup>122</sup> Charles Coughlin, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Coughlin, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

analyzed the behavior of businessmen in the small town of Muncie, Indiana: "They live in a culture built around competition, the private acquisition of property, and the necessity for eternal vigilance in holding on to what one has."<sup>125</sup> Essential to this understanding of Americanism were common notions of self-reliance, personal liberty, and competition for private property. What surprised the Lynds, however, was the fact that despite the economic shock of the Great Depression, few citizens of Muncie converted to radicalism. The Lynds expected to see a complete uprising of radical thought. After all, "no population could go through the things the United States has experienced in the last ten years without changes in both the overt and the intangible aspects of life."<sup>126</sup> The results, they observed, were profoundly different. Clinging to notions of progress and personal responsibility, the population of Muncie organized behind "the American ladder of opportunity" and the programs of the New Deal.<sup>127</sup> Common notions of American independence and perseverance, along with a firm belief in the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, superseded radical impulses.

It was in this context that the American Nazi movement saw the peak of its popularity and activity. In fact, it grew with such momentum that even its own members failed to predict the organization's trajectory. This relative burst in popularity did not stem from the manipulative machinations of its leader, Fritz Kuhn, as some have suggested, nor did it survive as an attempt by Nazi Germany to infiltrate and influence

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<sup>125</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1937), 25.; See also, Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1929).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.; Great Depression historian Alan Brinkley refers to this phenomenon as "Persistence." See Alan Brinkley, *Culture and Politics in the Great Depression* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1998).

American society.<sup>128</sup> American citizens became Nazis because they desired to do so and because National Socialism comforted them in times of economic and cultural alienation. Thus, in an attempt to better understand these individuals, historians must look at available evidence surrounding average members of the German-American Bund and determine the elements of public and private life that contributed to their radicalization. This is only possible through understanding the impacts of the Great Depression on German-American life.

The Great Depression imposed a severe economic restraint on the lives of many potential members of the American Nazi movement. Evidence for this notion is not difficult to find. The depression, which had thoroughly shocked the global economy to its core, affected every level of the American socioeconomic system. Robert and Helen Lynd observed in Muncie: "Unlike most socially generated catastrophes, in this case virtually no community had been cushioned by the blow; the great knife of the depression had cut impartially through the entire population."<sup>129</sup> From the troubles faced by farmers in the Dust Bowl of the '30s to the rampant unemployment in the nation's industrial centers, nearly every American felt the effects of the economic collapse. Certainly, German-American citizens were not exempt from this phenomenon. In fact, the members of the Bund, which historians and contemporary observers typically characterized as a lower-middle-class movement, faced some of the toughest conditions in the country.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> For an example of such arguments, see Joachim Remak, "'Friends of the New Germany': The Bund and German-American Relations," *Journal of Modern History* 29 (March 1957): 38–41.

<sup>129</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, as quoted in Brinkley, *Culture and Politics in the Great Depression*, 6.

<sup>130</sup> Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (New York: National University Press, 1973), 21.; Donald Strong conducted an extensive survey in Chicago on behalf of the federal government. He found that many of the most vocal Bundists also came from the poorest neighborhoods. See Donald Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941).

Attracted to heavily populated German boroughs in American urban centers, these individuals were some of the first groups to experience a dramatic transition from relative economic security to severe unemployment and poverty.

In light of this experience, ailing German-Americans speculated as to the cause of this economic decline, particularly the seemingly disproportionate severity with which the depression had damaged Americans of German extraction. Often, American Nazis would infuse this sentiment with a vehement anti-Semitism. In 1937, Bundist Joseph Dineen reflected on his experience with economic upheaval. Apparently out of resentment for the anti-Semitic policies of the Third Reich in tandem with worsening economic conditions, "[w]ell-to-do Jewish families in the Bronx fired all their German help- maids, cooks, nurses, gardeners."<sup>131</sup> Many of the Bundists perceived that their personal trauma was the result of an uncaring Jewish bourgeoisie. Left in desperation, these "kindly gentle souls... were driven to the Nazis for protection."<sup>132</sup> Dineen's experience demonstrates that the economic appeal of Nazism stemmed from contemporary conditions within the United States. National Socialism acknowledged these conditions and addressed them through the use of anti-Semitism.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Joseph Dineen, as quoted in Marvin D. Miller, *Wunderlich's Salute: The Interrelationship of the German-American Bund, Camp Siegfried, Yaphank, Long Island, and the Young Siegfrieds and their Relationship with American and Nazi Institutions* (Smithtown, NY: Malmud-Rose, 1983), 28. Miller's work offers a perplexing look into Nazi life. Lacking any sort of formal introduction, conclusion, or even a general thesis statement, this work has little value as a historical work. Still, the utility in Miller's work rests on the fact that he vigorously collected data from previously unknown sources, including several troves of old documentation from the FBI, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. Due to the nature of his archival research, his sources are otherwise unattainable. Therefore, *Wunderlich's Salute* remains a valuable source for primary research.

<sup>132</sup> Joseph Dineen, as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Countless examples of this sentiment appeared in "Letters to the Editor" Section of the Bund's newspaper. One example comes from a woman by the name of Mrs. I. Imfield, who lamented at the "mass, Jewish materialism that has consumed our nation." She, like many other radical anti-Semites, blamed most of the problems of the depression on the greed of Jewish oligarchs. See I. Imfield, "Letter to the Editor," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, December 15, 1935.

The exact root of this anti-Semitism is difficult to pinpoint; however, what is certain is that this sentiment was by no means unique to German-Americans, nor did it spring purely from the effects of the Great Depression. As early as 1920, Henry Ford, a man often praised for his ingenuity and entrepreneurship, published weekly articles decrying what he considered "the world's foremost problem."<sup>134</sup> Employing rhetorical strategies similar to those of the Nazis, Ford's pamphlet *The International Jew* depicted Jews as an orchestrated group of cunning schemers, solely attracted to power. This ultimately racist impulse reached beyond the minds of wealthy industrialists. One poll conducted by the Roper Center for Public Opinion concluded in 1939 that only 39% of individuals polled believed that Jews should be treated equally to everyone else; 53% claimed that Jews were inherently different from Anglo-Americans, and 10% believed that the United States government should actively deport Jewish individuals.<sup>135</sup> Ultimately, little available evidence can explain the root of this seemingly random hate, but the economic trauma of the Great Depression nonetheless exacerbated this sentiment; this is especially true within the American Nazi movement.

More important than the purely economic strife associated the Great Depression was the cultural alienation that the economic downturn inspired. German-Americans who joined the Bund did so because they felt that no other organization could sufficiently recognize their unique notions of fraternity and heritage. They felt that common American society had rejected desirable German values. One example comes from a

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<sup>134</sup> Henry Ford, "The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem," *The Dearborn Independent*, May 20, 1920. The anti-Semitism of Henry Ford is often forgotten in modern discourse. On multiple occasions, Ford demonstrated at least a warm tolerance of National Socialism. The most prominent was in 1936, when Ford travelled to Germany to receive Grand Service Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle, the highest honor Hitler could bestow upon a non-German. See Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 111.

<sup>135</sup> "The United States and European War," 1940, *The Roper Institute for Public Opinion*, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/public-perspective/ppscan/43/43098.pdf> (accessed March, 2014).

letter by Bundist Simon E. Koedel in 1937. Feeling ostracized in a non-German speaking community, Koedel wrote: "What do [others] know about Germany and the German people? Look around here a little, a bunch of dishonest politicians from coast to coast."<sup>136</sup>

Mrs. Emilie Pfeil, a concerned mother and eventual member of the Eastern District of the German-American Bund in New York. Concerned over the content of her children's textbooks, Pfeil wrote to other mothers in 1934:

Far from being fair, [this textbook's] words breathe hate of everything German- calling the Germans "Huns" repeatedly. I, as an American citizen, born in Germany, believe that... the truth should be taught to our children, not untruths, which make our children have disrespect, scorn and contempt for everything German.<sup>137</sup>

Pfeil's experience mirrored that of other frustrated German-Americans, who felt that the public attitudes towards Germany and those of German descent harmed the integrity of their communities. In Pfeil's case, the final straw came when her children's school banned the use of German within its halls in 1936.<sup>138</sup> During that time, she and her husband joined the German-American Bund.

As was the case with the Pfeils, many German-American citizens all across the country noticed the symptoms of ethnic alienation. Perhaps no individual expressed this feeling better than later-famous author and poet Charles Bukowski. For three years, from 1938 until the Bund's collapse in 1941, Bukowski faithfully attended American Nazi meetings, participating in all the events that the Bund had to offer. Known for his succinct (and often vulgar) diction, Bukowski expressed in his clearly autobiographical novel *Ham on Rye* the angst associated with coming of age during the Great Depression

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<sup>136</sup> Simon E. Koedel, "Letter of Simon E. Koedel to Gustav Neuss, June 24, 1937," in Miller, *Wunderlich's Salute*, 34.

<sup>137</sup> Emilie Pfeil, "Letter to Mother's Club of Islip Public School," in Miller, *Wunderlich's Salute*, 6.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



and why this drove him to radicalism. The teenaged narrator and main character of the story, Hank Chianski, described the author's firsthand experiences with alienation during his youth: "I had no Freedom. I had nothing. With Hitler around, maybe I'd even get a piece of ass now and then and more than a dollar a week allowance. As far as I could rationalize, I had nothing to protect."<sup>139</sup> Like everyone else who lived through the depression, Chianski, and by extension Bukowski, experienced the financial difficulties of poverty; however, Bukowski also dealt with severe ethnic alienation in addition to fiscal stress. Bukowski continued:

[H]aving been born in Germany, there was a natural loyalty and I didn't like to see the whole German nation, the people, depicted everywhere as monsters and idiots. In the movie theatres they sped up the newsreels to make Hitler and Mussolini look like frenetic madmen. Also, with all the instructors being anti-German I found it personally impossible to simply agree with them. Out of sheer alienation and a natural contrariness I decided to align myself against their point of view.<sup>140</sup>

Bukowski expressed an emotion that supersedes purely economic trauma. He observed that individuals treated him differently due to his German heritage. He consequently found in the German-American Bund an answer to his suffering.

*Ham on Rye* never elaborates on the specific practices of the Bund, but luckily, Bukowski offered his own experiences in an interview with his biographer. Describing the day-to-day rituals of the Bund, Bukowski explained: "We went down into a cellar. They had this great big American flag there.... We all stood up to pledge allegiance to the flag.... Then we started talking about the Communist menace."<sup>141</sup> Under the leadership of Hermann Schwinn, *Gauleiter* of the Western District, Bukowski had found fraternity and

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<sup>139</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Ham on Rye* (New York: Ecco, 2002), 236.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237.; See also Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 105.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Bukowski in Ben Pleasants, *Visceral Bukowski: Inside the Sniper Landscape of L.A. Writers* (Northville, MI: Sundog, 2004), 115.

understanding. For three years, he engaged in the Bund's activities and marches, all the while finding solace in the words of the Bund's leader, Fritz Kuhn, and also those of Adolf Hitler.

In this manner, the policies of the German-American Bund served as a source of comfort for its new members. In an economic sense, it provided members with a multitude of opportunities for employment within the organization. The most prestigious of these opportunities was a position within the *Ordnungsdienst* (OD), Fritz Kuhn's personal bodyguards.<sup>142</sup> Composing roughly ten percent of the Bund's membership, the OD, despite its name, which translates into Armed Guard, was an unarmed ceremonial organization reserved for ambitious young men between the age of eighteen and twenty-five. Because it offered close proximity to the *Bundesführer*, full access to the Bund's recreational facilities, such as Camp Siegfried in upstate New York, and the promise of a steady wage, young men flocked to the OD for support. For less athletic individuals, the Bund offered other possibilities for economic advancement. The Bund often used its propaganda machinery to promote the small businesses of "pro-German, pro-American" members; such was the case with Café Hindenburg, a cocktail lounge in Manhattan named after Paul von Hindenburg, the famous German general of World War I and the last president of Weimar Germany.<sup>143</sup> In June of 1936, the Bund sponsored a gathering at the bar, encouraging the patronage of other likeminded Americans. Café Hindenburg is just one of many examples of the Bund using its organization to improve the economic well-being of its members. Other examples are the weekly pro-America markets, where members would meet with one another at Camp Siegfried to exchange goods and

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<sup>142</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 92.

<sup>143</sup> "Café Hindenburg," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 13, 1936.

services.<sup>144</sup> While obviously none of these solutions could completely overcome the global effects of the Great Depression, the Bund's policies offered marginal help to those in need, while at the same time providing fraternity to address those problems. More important than these economic concerns, however, was the validation that the Bund gave to the German heritage of its members. As a Nazi institution, the Bund clearly valued the essential Germanness of those within its ranks. This notion of German pride had profound effects on the philosophy and actions of the German-American Bund, and from those effects outsiders drew certain implications. A more detailed discussion of how exactly the Bund addressed the cultural alienation of its members appears in Chapter 4.

At this point, however, it is clear that the transition from the Friends of the New Germany to the German-American Bund in the mid-'30s had larger implications than simply a change of name and leadership. Faced with opposition from the federal government as well as the formal condemnation of Adolf Hitler, the American Nazi movement in 1936 appeared poised for immediate destruction. Surprisingly enough, Fritz Kuhn used his significant organizational skills to complete the Americanization of the Nazi movement in the United States. In doing so, Kuhn and the remnants of the Friends of the New Germany tapped into a broad impulse toward radicalism, one that spanned the political spectrum in its refusal to accept traditional liberal sources of comfort. Finding its niche in the industrial centers of the country, the Bund appealed to individuals because of its unique ability to address the economic and cultural concerns of alienated German-Americans. As a result, the Bund propelled itself into public discourse in a way that neither Kuhn nor any of his predecessors could ever have anticipated.

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<sup>144</sup> A calendar for one of these events appears in "Wohin gehen wir?," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 18, 1936.

## **Chapter Four: The True Americans**

By 1939, the German-American Bund, at the peak of its popularity and public visibility, had emerged from the worst days of the Great Depression a stronger and more unified political group. Appealing to a minority of German-Americans who felt that modern American politics had rejected the importance of German heritage, the Bund forged a distinct brand of national identity, one in which German ethnicity could inform American politics. As a result, the group's members did not see themselves as emissaries of Nazi Germany, but rather as the harbingers of the only true form of essential Americanism. This aspect, more than any other, made the German-American Bund the most successful attempt at American Nazism. But while this notion served as the Bund's most powerful attraction, it was ultimately the group's greatest weakness as well. Invoking the names of beloved American historical figures such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in its activities, the Bund further provoked condemnation from a variety of public and private figures who saw National Socialism as the antithesis of acceptable American moral values. This notoriety drew the attention of governmental investigators, and as the country neared war with Germany, American society's contempt for the Bund ultimately hastened its downfall. Consequently, this chapter seeks to analyze the interaction between two wildly different understandings of what it meant to be American: one that infused itself with Nazism and another that was largely the popular product of the Great Depression and the New Deal.

As such, this chapter requires an understanding of nationalism and how it manifested in the activity both of the German-American Bund and of those who protested the Bund's existence. Each side condemned the other as un-American, and such

accusations implied that each side had formed specific assumptions about the nature of true Americanism and the practices that made such a philosophy possible. Beginning with the Bund, this chapter will analyze the underlying assumptions that informed these two forms of nationalist ideology in the 1930s, and will compare the assumptions of the Bund to those of common American society, whose national identity was overwhelmingly informed by the implications of the Great Depression and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ultimately, the dissolution of the German-American Bund in 1941 and the subsequent imprisonment of its leaders resulted not from any illegal activity on the part of the Bundists, but happened rather because individuals in power concluded that American Nazis did not meet the criteria for being a legitimate American organization. As a result, they must have represented an attempt by foreign agents to introduce corrupting propaganda into the general American population. Such a claim warrants historical investigation, and primary evidence suggests a far more complex political and cultural context than the one assumed by U.S. authorities.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the German-American Bund offered its members economic relief in times of financial hardship, but the benefits of the Bund extended far beyond simple economic aid; more importantly, its members were attracted to an overarching political nationalism that valued both German and American traditions. Prospective members, alienated in a period of political discourse that undervalued German heritage, found fulfillment in the Bund, which naturally saw *Deutschtum* as the pinnacle of cultural and racial existence. The best example of this phenomenon was the Bund's handling of the 1936 Olympics. When the International Olympic Committee in 1931 named Berlin the host of the next Olympics, Germany still operated as a liberal

democracy under the Weimar Republic.<sup>145</sup> Five years later, Hitler saw the Olympic ceremony as the perfect opportunity to showcase the economic and cultural might of the new Germany. Employing the infamous media talents of Joseph Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl, Nazi leadership offered foreign visitors a flawlessly scripted view into German life under National Socialism.<sup>146</sup> These masters of public relations instituted Olympic pseudo-traditions that extend even into the modern era. The carrying of the Olympic torch, for example, was a Nazi invention.<sup>147</sup> Naturally, members of the German-American Bund felt obligated to participate in this celebration of German excellence.

The Bund's participation in the 1936 Olympics represented a desire to celebrate German heritage. Initially, Kuhn and the rest of the Bund's leadership only wished to relay to American audiences the success of Nazi Germany. As much was evident in the depiction of Adolf Hitler in the organization's propaganda machinery. Most important about the games, according to writers for the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* and its editor-in-chief, Walter Kappe, was Hitler's success in "the complete breaking-down of the Class idea."<sup>148</sup> The success of the German nation, according to this author, rested on Hitler's ability to transcend economic distinction in favor of the German *Völk*, an idealized version of the strong, Aryan nation. So popular was this notion among the

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<sup>145</sup> Arnie Bernstein, *Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 56.

<sup>146</sup> Of course, this notion neglects the thousands who suffered in preparation for the Olympic games, most notably individuals of Roma or Sinti descent. Perceiving these individuals as shiftless Gypsies, Nazi authorities rounded up several communities of Roma and Sinti, corralling them in unsanitary sewage facilities in order to hide them from the public eye during the athletic events. Forced to handle insalubrious conditions, many Roma and Sinti eventually succumbed to disease during the course of the Olympic games. For more on Gypsy persecution, see Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, "The Persecution of Roma and Sinti," in *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 113-135.

<sup>147</sup> The first depiction of the Olympic torch appears in Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, International Olympic Committee, 1938.

<sup>148</sup> Douglas Chandler, "The Man of the Hour," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 15, 1936.

members of the Bund that they demanded greater participation within the games. On a wave of support from within the organization, Fritz Kuhn campaigned to send himself, select members of the *Ordnungsdienst*, and the rest of the Bund's top leadership to Berlin. Raising over six thousand dollars, in addition to regular membership dues, ordinary members fully financed the trip and reserved the resulting surplus for the German Winter Relief Fund, a charity organization within the Third Reich.<sup>149</sup> The trip itself was an unconditional success. In addition to attending the opening ceremony, Kuhn and his parade of supporters received the opportunity to meet the *Führer* in person, a pleasure Hitler granted to large audiences at all of his public events.<sup>150</sup> Clearly oblivious to the fact that he had abandoned the Friends of the New Germany just one year earlier, Hitler exchanged with Kuhn pleasantries and a handshake before the Chancellor informally remarked, "Go over there and continue the fight."<sup>151</sup> What amounted to a vague statement from Hitler meant official validation to the leaders of the German-American Bund and its members, confirming their support for the German nation.

Of course, the Bund's emphasis on German heritage extended beyond the 1936 Olympic games. Until its disbandment, depictions of the success of the German nation continued to be a popular theme throughout the organization's existence. Pictures of the Third Reich flooded the Bund's newspaper. In one typical article, published in May of 1936, images of parading horse-drawn vehicles were placed adjacent to photographs of German railroad and industrial construction; articles such as these provided a vibrant

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<sup>149</sup> "Das Ehrengeschenk für Adolf Hitler," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, July 23, 1936. See also Susan A. Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park: Markgraf Publication Group, 1990), 122.

<sup>150</sup> The Bund published an account of the event in "Hitler empfängt Amerikadeutsche," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, September 10, 1936.

<sup>151</sup> Adolf Hitler, as quoted in Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 64.; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 275.

illustration of how National Socialism had brought the cultural traditions of old Germany into modernity.<sup>152</sup> The Bund also tried to emulate the apparent progressivism of Germany in their own U.S. facilities. Camp Siegfried in Yaphank, New York, as well as similar facilities across the country, hosted a variety of "pro-German" events, including beer-hall meetings, children's camps, and outdoor activities to promote what Hitler called the "steel dexterity" of the "national community."<sup>153</sup> In the context of these camps, men, women, and children participated in *Kameradschaft* meetings, where they began each weekly festival not only with a pledge of allegiance to the United States, but also to one another, to preserve *Deutschtum* in the country through their own brand of National Socialism. Each member, by the dictum of Kuhn, pledged allegiance to the following:

[T]o honor and defend the Constitution, the flag and institutions of the United States of America; to combat all atheistic teachings and abuses of the pulpits; to oppose all racial intermixture between Aryans and Asiatics, Africans and other non-Aryans; to fight communism; to break up the dictatorship of the Jewish international minority; to strive for a true peace; and to defend the right to cherish the German language and German customs.<sup>154</sup>

In the German-American Bund, members found a common love of German culture that was increasingly rare outside the walls of Camp Siegfried.

In addition to members' professed love of German heritage, the Bund also allowed alienated members of society to express their American ideals. In other words, the German-American Bund was dedicated to life within the realm of American politics and campaigned actively, albeit ineffectually, for serious political reform. This included the

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<sup>152</sup> "Das neue Deutschland in Bild," *Deutscher weckruf und Beobachter*, May 14, 1936.

<sup>153</sup> Camp Yaphank was established in 1935, under the Friends of the New Germany. Like many other aspects of the Bund, Kuhn inherited this land from his predecessors and then expanded on it to include more "American" activities, such as shooting practice with rifles purchased from the National Rifle Association. A detailed view of the grounds appears in "Bilder von ersten Sommerfest auf "Camp Seigfried"" *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, August 30, 1935. See also Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 97.; Adolf Hitler, as quoted in Burleigh and Wippermann, *The Racial State*, 201-202.

<sup>154</sup> Fritz Kuhn, "Awake and Act," as quoted in Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 74.



pursuit of long-term as well as short-term policy goals. In the long run, Kuhn and the rest of the Bund fully desired to see the United States become a fascist dictatorship, ideally under Kuhn's leadership. They admired Hitler's style of governance and the seemingly phenomenal economic returns that such style had brought to the German people.

However, more important than economics was National Socialism's embodiment of "German character and historical development."<sup>155</sup> This was because they believed that unlike in a totalitarian state, leadership should rely not "exclusively on force... against the will of the majority of the nation," but rather on "constitutional guarantees of civil freedom," "the parliamentary system of democracy," and "recognition of authority upheld by the people."<sup>156</sup> Of course, Bundists valued the people's "voluntary subjugation to one man" under a militaristic chain of command, but they also argued that the *Führer* should be accountable to the people.<sup>157</sup> Ultimately, Bundists believed National Socialism could maintain the economic and cultural health of the nation while at the same time providing for a progressive and accountable system of government.

In addition to ambitious, long-term political goals, the Bund outlined small political reforms that demonstrated its commitment to life within the United States. Most of these suggested policies were critical responses to President Roosevelt and the New Deal. Referring to Roosevelt's series of reforms and relief agencies as the "Jew-Deal," Bundists found that the federal government during the late '30s represented much of what they felt troubled American culture and politics.<sup>158</sup> As the term "Jew-Deal" suggests, American Nazis saw disproportionate Jewish influence on President Roosevelt and the

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<sup>155</sup> "Dictatorship or Leadership?," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 13, 1936.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> "Icke's Zeppelin Sabotage," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, May 19, 1938.

Democratic Party. The most important example was the federal government's tariff on German imports. On June 4, 1936, the Treasury Department announced a new tax on most incoming German goods, including cotton, surgical utensils, and children's toys. Through this tax, regulators expected to raise existing government revenue by approximately fifty-six percent on affected goods.<sup>159</sup> But the tariff, according to the Bund's media sources, only compounded existing resentment towards German imports, which were already the targets of significant boycotts by Jewish Americans.<sup>160</sup> Without support in Congress or any other legislative assembly, the Bund's options for lobbying were extremely limited, which explains why the organization could never enact any serious change to the United States' tariff laws.

Aside from these tariff complaints, members of the Bund were also interested in the moral and racial integrity of the nation. One native-born citizen, John B. Trevor, expressed his concern in a letter to the editor of the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*. Referencing the Dies Criminal Alien Act, a small piece of legislation designed to ease the naturalization process for immigrants without criminal records, Trevor wrote that Roosevelt's Labor Department favored "exempt hordes of alien habitual criminals who infest our slums and pollute the American race with a progeny of candidates for our jails,

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<sup>159</sup> "Roosevelt Administration Joins the Boycott," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 18, 1936.

<sup>160</sup> A popular trend among Jewish Americans after 1935 was to boycott German-made goods. This was generally to protest the blatantly anti-Semitic policies of Nazi Germany. More specifically, Jewish Americans were mimicking the failed German Day of 1933, when Joseph Goebbels attempted to organize a boycott of all Jewish goods and services in Germany. Goebbels only maintained the boycott for one day, using SA thugs to prevent Germans from entering Jewish storefronts. Regardless of the SA's intimidation tactics, many Germans still tried to enter Jewish shops, thus demonstrating to Goebbels that German anti-Semitism was not as powerful as he and Hitler would have hoped. The boycott, as a result, was a significant, albeit temporary, blow to the early anti-Semitism of the Nazis. See Burleigh and Wippermann, *The Racial State*, 44.

insane asylums and charitable institutions."<sup>161</sup> Mirroring the language of American eugenicists and nativists of the 1920s, ideas such as Trevor's expressed a vehement distress about the country's racial question, one that concerned public costs as well as ethnic intermingling. Luckily for Trevor and the rest of the Bund, the Dies Criminal Alien Act died in committee, amounting to a small success for the nation's apparent racial and social purity.<sup>162</sup>

Outside of racial policy or foreign relations, the Bund displayed substantial concern for domestic economic policy. Often operating on misguided assumptions about international trade, the Bund, like many other political interests at the time, desired increased restrictions on agricultural imports. Producing a chart depicting the government's estimation of agricultural imports, one Bund author wrote: "[C]onsider for a minute how many acres of land it would have taken to have produced the imported farm products and how much more the income of the American farmer would have been if we would have raised these additional amounts at home."<sup>163</sup> The Bund was very critical of the New Deal farm subsidization policy, which paid many farmers to leave fields fallow, even while urbanites and their families starved. Members believed that import tariffs could raise the price of foreign products, thus increasing domestic agricultural prices, and ultimately, the income of farmers. This position demonstrated a surprising characteristic of Bundists, who despite the fact that most members populated urban areas and would

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<sup>161</sup> John B. Trevor, "Shall Congress Make America a Resort for Alien Criminals?," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, May 12, 1938. This bill was named after Congressman Martin Dies, Jr. of Texas, a figure who will become increasingly important to the Bund as it continues to antagonize domestic voters.

<sup>162</sup> One must remember that under the tenets of National Socialism, social and racial purity were one in the same. Most Nazi scientists agreed that undesirable social traits, such as promiscuity, criminality, and alcoholism were genetic traits passed from parents to children. Nazis sought the extermination of asocial qualities as well as inferior races.

<sup>163</sup> "United States Imports of Competitive Farm Products, 1937 against 1932," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, May 19, 1938.

suffer from increased food prices, still supported the glorification of the American farmer. Perhaps they saw in farmers the idealized American folk, an offshoot of the *völkische* tradition imported from Germany.<sup>164</sup> Regardless of their reasons, however, the fact that the German-American Bund outlined specific policy reforms in a variety of fields suggests that Bundists desired a life within the United States, where they were free to engage in active political lobbying.

Clearly, members of the Bund saw themselves not only as Germans, the peak of the racial-biological hierarchy, but also as Americans, free to engage in public debate to achieve their own ends. This philosophy resulted in a peculiar form of nationalism that was neither completely German nor entirely American. During their brief stint in the public spotlight, Bundists formed their own notions of national identity, which resulted in a distinctly German-American fusion of cultural traditions. In a practical sense, this dual nationalism manifested in an amalgamation of popular notions of national identity, retroactively imbuing classic American historical figures with virtuous German ideals and characteristics. One Bundist explained that the organization was committed to "traditional German spiritual ideals- ideals praised by Washington, Jefferson and Garfield down to Theodore Roosevelt."<sup>165</sup> More specifically, the author stated that the Bund inspired within its members "healthy bodies, alert minds and sound morals," principles that every American should desire.<sup>166</sup> Still, the combination of American and German

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<sup>164</sup> For more on the *völkische* tradition, see Burleigh and Wippermann, "Barbarous Utopias: Racial Ideologies in Germany," in *The Racial State*.

<sup>165</sup> "German Americans Indicted For Conducting a Recreation Camp," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 9, 1938.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*; Perhaps a bit of irony exists in the fact that the Bund saw Theodore Roosevelt as a great embodiment of German-American principles but saw his cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as the embodiment of Jewish manipulation. Unfortunately, the Bund never printed any articles that explained the difference between these two men.

values extended beyond mere rhetoric; Bundists infused this notion into every aspect of their philosophy.

Such was the case with the Bund's near obsession with Abraham Lincoln. Members of the American Nazi press had praised President Lincoln since 1935, extolling his actions during the Civil War. One writer felt that Lincoln's prowess during the chaos of the late nineteenth century was particularly notable because he dealt simultaneously both with political uncertainty and with the nation's "*Rassenproblem*," or race problem.<sup>167</sup> The beauty of Lincoln's leadership, according to one author, was that he was able to preserve the nation, and its implicit racial hierarchy, despite extending basic freedoms to black Americans. As the Bund became increasingly Americanized, this interest in the life of Abraham Lincoln only strengthened. One of the stranger interpretations came in 1939, when one author compared Abraham Lincoln to a popular German counterpart, Horst Wessel.<sup>168</sup> Horst Wessel, a young Nazi activist who was murdered in 1930 before Hitler's rise to power, had become a national martyr in Germany by 1939. The song "*Horst Wessel Lied*" often served as a second national anthem.<sup>169</sup> The tenuous connection between Wessel and Lincoln served as a source of pride for interested German-Americans. Both were murdered before the peak of their activity; both were outspoken and idealistic, and both freed their respective nations from "the slavery of international Jewish finance and the threatened scourge of Bolshevism."<sup>170</sup> Both of these men represented ideals that inspired the Bund, and the comparison between them demonstrated the movement's unique fusion of German and American traditions.

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<sup>167</sup> Waldemart Hartmann, "Abraham Lincoln und das Rassenproblem Amerikas," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, October 25, 1935.

<sup>168</sup> "'Honest Abe' and Horst Wessel," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, February 2, 1939.

<sup>169</sup> Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 25.

<sup>170</sup> "'Honest Abe' and Horst Wessel," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, February 2, 1939.

This dual nationalism reached a peak in February of 1939. At the height of his public presence, Fritz Kuhn decided to hold a rally at the famous Madison Square Garden in honor of George Washington, America's first president and the nation's "first fascist."<sup>171</sup> To the members of the Bund, George Washington represented all the qualities they envisioned for the ideal military leader: charismatic yet humble, experienced with command, and emboldened with a sense of patriotic duty to his nation. The Bund somewhat anachronistically saw Washington as the full embodiment of the special brand of National Socialism that a handful of German-Americans had developed over the past decade, combining American history with German principles.

The result of this reasoning was a rally that would determine the fate of the German-American Bund. With a crowd of over 20,000 individuals, many of whom attended in full Nazi regalia, the rally had attracted the undivided attention of both sympathizers and opponents.<sup>172</sup> Inside the stadium, American flags and golden swastikas adorned a several-story-tall portrait of Washington, and at the first president's feet stood a podium for the Bund's distinguished speakers. Throughout the proceedings, Fritz Kuhn remained the center of attention. Surrounded by over 3,000 members of the *Ordnungsdienst*, who coincidentally protected him from an attacker just moments after he stepped behind the podium, Kuhn addressed his awe-struck followers:

I am sure I do not come before you tonight as a complete stranger. You will have heard of me in the Jewish-controlled press as a creature with horns, a cloven-hoof and a long tail.... They will say that I am putting some hocus-pocus over on you, and that I am not what I appear to be- or

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<sup>171</sup> "Mass Demonstration for True Americanism And George Washington Birthday Exercises," *Detuscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, January 29, 1939.; "Nazis Hail George Washington as First Fascist," *Life*, March 7, 1938.

<sup>172</sup> "22,000 Nazis Hold Rally in Garden: Police Check Foes," *New York Times*, February 21, 1939.

what I say to you is propaganda prepared for me by Dr. Goebbels at the instigation of Chancellor Hitler.<sup>173</sup>

While Kuhn's half sarcastic gesture evoked laughter from his supporters, it did little to mitigate the concerns of the thousands of angry protestors outside. These individuals saw the use of Washington's portrait and words as an insult to real Americanism. They saw the anti-Semitism of the Bund as a rejection of the principles of religious freedom and equality that informed the political history of the United States. Put simply, they saw the Bund as un-American.

By 1939, the Bund had offended traditional senses of what it meant to be American. According to prominent individuals, foreign ideology riddled the Bund's philosophy, and this characteristic precluded the alleged Americanism of Nazism. To understand these popular notions of Americanism, historians must once again look to the Great Depression for clarification. Confronted by the trauma of economic downturn, authors, artists, and other public figures urged Americans to rally around their common national heritage. One example came from John Dos Passos, a former friend of communism and popular writer during the 1930s. In his work *The Ground We Stand On: The History of a Political Creed*, Dos Passos wrote: "In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men's reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present."<sup>174</sup> In the face of the depression, Dos Passos called on his readers to "look back as well as forward," to remember the common tones of Americanism that made their country great.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Fritz Kuhn, "The German-American Bund at Madison Square Garden February 20, 1939," *Free America!*, [https://ia700202.us.archive.org/5/items/FreeAmerica\\_0/FA\\_PDF\\_1.pdf](https://ia700202.us.archive.org/5/items/FreeAmerica_0/FA_PDF_1.pdf) (accessed March 2014).

<sup>174</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: The History of a Political Creed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

This sentiment extended beyond the reaches of written word. By the late '30s and early '40s, a newfound nationalism permeated American popular culture, and it would have strong implications for the future for the German-American Bund. In movies, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based off the book by John Steinbeck, offered a critical look into the nature of American life.<sup>176</sup> The Joads, a family displaced by desperation and the Dust Bowl, fight for survival on the road to California. By the end of the film, Ma Joad, the matriarch of the family comes to the realization, "We're the people. We go on..."<sup>177</sup> The film offered a celebration of the American rural workers, who embodied classic notions of sturdy persistence. In the political realm, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* follows the fictional tale of a naive but caring Senator (played by James Stewart) who leads a filibuster in the Senate Chamber in a fight against the country's most corrupt conservative elements.<sup>178</sup> The movie's titular character demonstrated to skeptical onlookers what being American was all about: candor, simplicity, and truth. In the uncertainty of the depression, these values took on a renewed value in discourse.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Two, the depression had challenged traditional notions of laissez-faire capitalism. In place of faith in the free market, many New Deal policies ignited a renewed faith in the American republic. Perhaps no individual expressed this sensation better than artist Stuart Davis. As an employee of the Works Progress Administration, Davis conveyed in his works a renewed sense of what it meant to be American. The painting "New York Waterfront" (1938) best described his cultural sentiment:

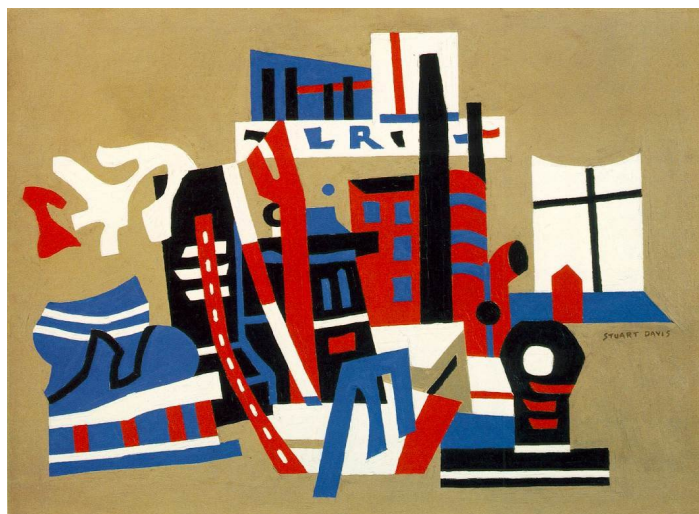
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<sup>176</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).; *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford (1940; Twentieth Century Fox).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, directed by Frank Capra (1939; Columbia Pictures).





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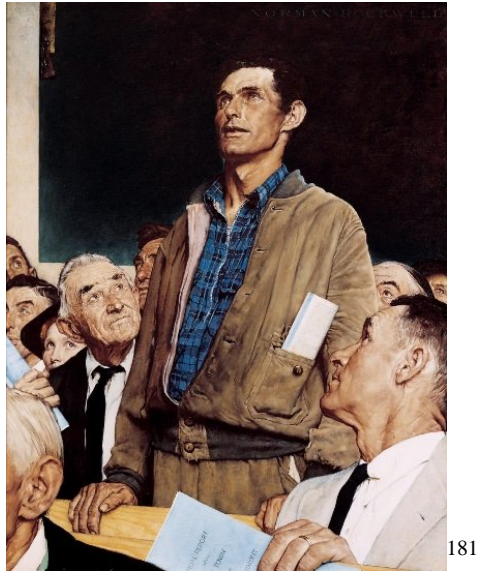
As a cubist expression of the industrialized New York landscape, this painting offered a creative interpretation of the place of America in modernity. Utilizing a special technique of painting that only depicts small but identifiable parts of industrial icons, such as a stretch of railroad tracks, Davis shows a nation whose sum is greater than its parts; industrial pieces all work together to create a cohesive unit, underlined by the patriotic use of red, white, and blue. As a result, Davis emphasizes a picture of the nation that rests on existing notions of heritage to forge a common essence of modern American identity.

Such cultural nationalism was very much the result of the ethos of the New Deal. This is especially apparent in the works of famed illustrator Norman Rockwell. Drawing inspiration from the speeches of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rockwell in 1943 published four posters depicting the president's Four Freedoms, an expression of quintessential American values. These works, originally printed *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1943,

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<sup>179</sup> Stuart Davis, "New York Waterfront," *Flickrriver*, <http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/hanneorla/3801383273/> (accessed March 2014).

grew in popularity during the World War II.<sup>180</sup> They became so influential that eventually, the Treasury Department used them as posters to sell war bonds. they represented common notions of Americanism that were extremely relevant during the mid-to-late '30s. The first, "Freedom of Speech," represents the American proclivity towards civic discourse:



This illustration represents a glorification of traditional American rights and liberties: equality, freedom of conscience, and the right to speak to one's mind. A blue-collar worker is free to discuss his opinions at a local town hall meeting while older and wealthier men pay close attention to his words. The next illustration, "Freedom from Want," shows the effect the Great Depression had on Americanism:

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<sup>180</sup> These posters were published over the course of a month in *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 20-March 13, 1943.

<sup>181</sup> Norman Rockwell, "Freedom of Speech," *Coral Spring Talk*, [http://coralspringstalk.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Rockwell\\_1943\\_Four-Freedoms\\_Speech-1.jpg](http://coralspringstalk.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Rockwell_1943_Four-Freedoms_Speech-1.jpg) (accessed March 2014).



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With a humble family crowded around a bountiful turkey dinner, this picture showed what so many families had lost during the Great Depression: the means to provide for loved ones. The New Deal had promised to restore this right because health and family were essential pieces of the American Dream. Rockwell presented pictures of ideal Americans during the late '30s and early '40s. He drew on common assumptions about national identity to distinguish the American experience from that of every other culture.<sup>183</sup> These assumptions, consequently, are revealing about the nature of nationalism during the late '30s. Rockwell imagined an ideal American whose homogeneous characteristics defined him. More specifically, Rockwell depicted the ideal American as a strong-jawed Caucasian man. Consequently, women, racial minorities, and political outcasts naturally fell out of popular society's conception of a politically active American. The irony of these paintings rests in the fact these techniques used to convey Americanism were in all actuality very similar to those of the German-American

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<sup>182</sup> Norman Rockwell, "Freedom from Want," *Art History*, <http://0.tqn.com/d/arthistory/1/0/r/1/1/Norman-Rockwell-Freedom-from-Want-1943.jpg> (accessed March 2014).

<sup>183</sup> Rockwell's other illustrations are "Freedom of Worship" and "Freedom from Fear."

Bund. Without context, Rockwell's fictional men exhibit many of the strong Aryan ideals that American Nazis valued: handsome, bold, and bound to the fate of the greater community. In practice, however, Rockwell's principles ultimately existed as means to fight the Nazis. Used to sell war bonds as well as to embody essential Americanism, the Four Freedoms both figuratively and literally contributed to the downfall of Nazism.

In 1939, National Socialism, with its inherent anti-democratic radicalism and seemingly foreign ideology, offended these common assumptions about American nationalism, and as a result, ignited a wave of public protest that ultimately hastened the Bund's downfall. Anti-Nazi sentiment had existed since the days of the Friends of the New Germany. In addition to continuous investigations and accusations by Congressman Samuel Dickstein (a Democrat from New York City), the American Nazi movement often found itself engaged in brawls with passionate enemies. One revealing example came in October of 1935, when an unemployed boxer of Jewish descent named Rat Arno led an attack on the Friends' Newark chapter. Coordinating with the Jewish Veterans Association in New Jersey, Arno snuck behind the auditorium of a Nazi meeting one night and used a ladder to reach the roof. Once on top of the building, Arno dropped several stink bombs into the proceedings, thus forcing seven hundred members out into the open. Arno's actions ignited a brawl in Newark that lasted until local police finally intervened.<sup>184</sup> One important aspect to note is that throughout all of these crude brawls, American Nazis were never the primary aggressors. Aware of the broad disapproval of

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<sup>184</sup> Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 137-138.

their practices, Bundists worked hard to avoid antagonizing an already unsympathetic American public.<sup>185</sup>

With the rise of the German-American Bund and its increasingly American-oriented rhetoric, public discomfort with National Socialism only increased. Afraid of the impact of foreign ideology in the late '30s, many worried citizens asked their Representatives to find the extent of foreign influence on American soil, culminating in the passage of House Resolution 282 in May of 1938.<sup>186</sup> This resulted in the formation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), also known as the Dies Committee after its chairman, Martin Dies, Jr. of Texas.<sup>187</sup> Authorized to investigate Nazi and Communist activity in the United States, the Dies Committee attracted the participation of Congressman Dickstein, a long-time adversary of the Bund. Setting the criteria for the committee's investigative procedures, Congressman Dies stated: "[T]his committee is determined to conduct its investigation upon a dignified plane and to adopt and maintain throughout the course of the hearings a judicial attitude. The committee has no preconceived views of what the truth is respecting the subject matter of this inquiry."<sup>188</sup> While this caveat seemed laudable, the subsequent actions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities ultimately proved this assertion wrong.

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<sup>185</sup> Bernstein provides detailed accounts of Nazi brawls with several notorious groups, including those involved with organized crime. Individuals like Mickey Cohen or "Bugsy" Siegel often took credit for ordering attacks on Nazis, but while these accounts are interesting and filled with colorful characters, these narratives are not relevant to the topic at hand.

<sup>186</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 175. H.R. 282 was passed with a vote of 191-41.

<sup>187</sup> A complete and methodical, although somewhat biased, account of the formation of the Dies Committee can be found in August Raymond Ogden, *The Dies Committee: A Study of the Special House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities 1938-1944* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945). See also Lewis A. Kaplan, "The House Un-American Activities Committee," *The Journal of Politics* 30 (July 1968): 647-671.

<sup>188</sup> Martin Dies, Jr. as quoted in Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 184-185.

The Dies Committee conducted an investigation based on unfounded assumptions about American nationalism and political homogeneity. It then proceeded to prosecute the German-American Bund on those extralegal assumptions. Accordingly, one of the major concerns of the representatives on the Dies Committee was the health of the American nation. During the testimony of Fritz Kuhn, Republican Congressman Noah H. Mason of Illinois stated:

I would like to interject this thought, that if there is any necessity for a German-American Bund, to teach American children and Americans of German birth all the things that Germany stands for, the logical conclusion would be that the French descendants in the country and the English and the Norwegian and the Danish and the descendants of all the other nations should have similar bunds to do the same thing for their fatherlands. Then we would have no Nation whatever, because we would just be a varied group.<sup>189</sup>

Mason's statement accurately depicted the motivations of the Dies Committee, which feared the German-American Bund because the group allegedly threatened to subvert the committee's notions of a homogeneous, unified American nationalism. The committee's conclusions, therefore, did not rest on any statute concerning sedition or the potential for violence. In fact, all evidence pointed to the contrary. As noted in the appendix of HUAC's investigation, both the Attorney General, Homer Cummings, and J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation concluded that the Bund posed no threat to the security of the republic.<sup>190</sup> In short, the criminal investigators concluded that the Bund was indeed loud and racist, but well within its First Amendment rights.

The Dies Committee, therefore, condemned the Bund not for having broken any laws, but rather because the Bund had failed to meet the common definition of

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<sup>189</sup> Noah H. Mason, as quoted in *Investigation of Un-American Activities and Propaganda*, 76th Congress, 1st Session, 1939, 3781.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 6043.; Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 295.; Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 95.

Americanism. Spreading its conclusions through the press, the committee determined that the Bund was not a serious American organization, but rather that a "foreign institute of the Nazis [was] actively engaged in directing, planning, and helping to finance under various names the activities and programs of the German-American Bund."<sup>191</sup> This assertion rested on the dubious testimony of John C. Metcalfe, a reporter who attended several Bund meetings in 1937. As a witness, Metcalfe's credentials were highly suspect. As none of his testimony elicited cooperation from other witnesses, most of his claims conformed to vague fears about the nature of the movement and its foreign roots. Metcalfe's most damning allegation came when he stated that Fritz Kuhn kept in constant contact with Adolf Hitler, who personally oversaw the implementation of National Socialism in the United States.<sup>192</sup> While this claim had absolutely no basis in fact, congressmen welcomed his conclusions and used them to accuse the Bund of un-Americanism.

HUAC did not have the authority to arrest any of the Bundists, but the public nonetheless met its report with overwhelming support. A Gallup poll in December of 1938 found that three out of five voters followed the activities of the Dies Committee, and three out of four voters thought that the investigations into radicalism should continue.<sup>193</sup> *The Washington Post* congratulated Congressman Dies on his "outstanding patriotic service" and awarded him the "Americanism award for 1938."<sup>194</sup> In the realm of entertainment, movies decrying National Socialism flooded theaters. The most popular of these films, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), emphasized the evils of Nazism as well

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<sup>191</sup> *New York Times*, August 13, 1938.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *New York Times*, December 11, 1938.

<sup>194</sup> *Washington Post*, January 1939.; Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 189.

as those of the German-American Bund, which the producers depicted as a group of malicious thugs.<sup>195</sup> Clearly, the public had accepted Congress's interpretation of un-Americanism.

Sensing weakness from the German-American Bund, state and local officials mounted a prosecutorial campaign that drained the Bund of members and financial stability. The first major blow came in June of 1938, when the state of New York successfully forced the closure of Camp Siegfried.<sup>196</sup> District Attorney Fred J. Munder convinced a jury that the Bundists had sworn allegiance to Adolf Hitler, and that therefore the camp operated in violation of the state's Civil Rights Law, which required "oath-bound organizations" to complete special paperwork before opening private institutions.<sup>197</sup> Because Camp Siegfried was a source of income for the Bund, as well as a major attraction for members, its closure meant a serious loss to the organization, especially as funds and members became more scarce. The extended legal battle drained the Bund of its revenue, and while it attempted to draw more capital from its dwindling numbers, its power and activity slowly diminished.<sup>198</sup> The final blow came in December of 1939, when District Attorney Thomas Dewey, in conjunction with Fiorello LaGuardia, Mayor of New York, successfully sought the conviction of Fritz Kuhn on charges of grand larceny for the embezzlement of funds from the Bund itself.<sup>199</sup> According to prosecutors, Kuhn had stolen \$14,548 from the organization's coffers over the course of his leadership, and the jury sentenced him to five years in state prison. Of course, the rest

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<sup>195</sup> Eric J. Sandeen "Anti-Nazi Sentiment in Film: 'Confessions of a Nazi Spy' and The German-American Bund," *American Studies* 20, no. 2 (1979): 75.

<sup>196</sup> "German Americans Indicted For Conducting a Recreation Camp," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, June 8, 1938.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> "Every Dollar Helps!," *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, October 6, 1938.

<sup>199</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 203.



of the Bund, under the *führerprinzip*, saw no fault in the actions of its leader, who was entitled to all the assets that the organization owned. Declaring him a "prisoner of war," the Bund contended that Kuhn was "convicted of a crime he cannot commit."<sup>200</sup>

Regardless, Kuhn spent the next five years of his life in Sing Sing Prison. Upon his release in 1943, the federal government relocated him and his family to an internment camp in Crystal City, Texas. In 1945, the government then deported him back to West Germany to be tried as a war criminal. He died in 1951 in nearly complete obscurity.<sup>201</sup>

The remnants of the German-American Bund ultimately fared no better than its disgraced leader. Before leaving for prison, Kuhn appointed Wilhelm Kunze to his position as *Bundesführer*.<sup>202</sup> Kunze lacked the passion and organizational skills that had proven so successful for his predecessor, and even if he had been an efficient leader, he lacked the following to generate any sort of noticeable movement. Sensing the direction of American Nazism, most members left after the conviction of Kuhn, and the shell of the Bund painfully persisted for two challenging yet ultimately pointless years. Debt and legal costs restricted funding for pro-German, pro-American activities, while individual states continued to harass Bundists. By 1941, California had mounted a new investigation into the group's un-Americanism, and Florida and New Jersey both banned membership outright.<sup>203</sup> On December 8, 1941, one day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bund's executive committee voted to dissolve the organization.<sup>204</sup> Unfortunately, this move did nothing to stop the federal government from sending the

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<sup>200</sup> "Kuhn, A Prisoner of War!," *Detuscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, December 9, 1939.

<sup>201</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 227.

<sup>202</sup> Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (New York: National University Press, 1973), 97.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.; Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 205.

Bund's former leadership to join Kuhn in Crystal City, Texas, where the Bund faded into nothingness.

Thus, the fall of the Bund resulted from the interaction between two understandings of Americanism. On one hand, the Bund saw German race and ethnicity as essential factors in political discourse. Its members entered the domestic political landscape dedicated to reforming the nation in favor of extreme right-wing ideals. This notion offended popular assumptions of Americanism, which were largely informed by the legacy of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Americans and their elected officials rallied around common notions of nationalism and proceeded to use those assumptions to prosecute the Bund, which consistently worked to avoid serious illegal activity. Regardless, public officials used the unpopularity of the Bund and its philosophy to question the legitimacy of the organization. Under this strategy, federal, local, and state governments harassed the Bund until it could no longer afford to function, thus resulting in its ultimate dissolution.

## **Conclusion**

The legacy of the German-American Bund extended far beyond its miniscule political sway and isolated popularity. As a movement that at its peak amounted to only several thousand members, the Bund posed no threat to the security of the United States or even to the policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt. What is important, however, is the fact that the Bund motivated significant public fervor during its short reign as the country's premiere National Socialist organization, and that this fervor affected both its friends and its enemies. By reconciling this sentiment within the context of the Great Depression, this thesis has provided a greater understanding of the American Nazi movement's rise and subsequent fall; the analysis presented here explores not only the actions of the organization's leaders, such as Heinz Spanknöbel and Fritz Kuhn, but also the emotions of its members, without whom American Nazism would have been impossible.

The political and social context of the United States played a crucial role in the development of the German-American Bund. The 1920s, a decade characterized by the clash between modernity and parochial autonomy, offered the proponents of National Socialism the first opportunity to bring its message to American shores. Providing an intellectual safe haven for displaced Nazis, the Teutonia Association remained an isolated and relatively small organization because it failed to address the overarching political concerns of American citizens. Tailored to the context of Weimar Germany, Teutonic ideology fell on complacent American ears, who overwhelmingly withdrew from international discourse and concern over the Treaty of Versailles. Learning from the mistakes of the Teutonia Association, American Nazi leaders such as Fritz Gissibl and Heinz Spanknöbel eventually catalyzed a deliberate shift within their movement to

address American audiences. Only by understanding the Great Depression can historians hope to explain this transition.

The Great Depression, with its economic and political uncertainty, was the driving force behind the rise of the Friends of the New Germany, and later of the German-American Bund. Not only did the economic downturn call into question the legitimacy of classical American liberalism, which emphasized private property and individual competition, but it also ignited a power struggle within the American Nazi movement. Competing for prestige, Heinz Spanknöbel emerged out of this turmoil a leader dedicated to influencing the future of American politics. His policies both cemented his grip over the Friends of the New Germany and attracted new members to burgeoning American National Socialism. With this increased presence in American politics, National Socialism came under greater scrutiny. Skeptical figures, such as Congressman Samuel Dickstein, saw the Americanism of the Friends as a thinly-veiled attempt at Nazi infiltration into American life. This sentiment, combined with serious political miscalculations by Heinz Spanknöbel, forced the ousting of its ambitious leader and coerced formal abandonment by Nazi Germany.

In 1936, the German-American Bund rose unexpectedly from the remnants of its predecessors. *Bundesführer* Fritz Kuhn finished the group's transition to the American sphere of discourse and capitalized on the radical ideology of the 1930s to attract even more participation. Once again, historians must look to the Great Depression to understand this burst in domestic Nazi activity. German-Americans, like every other demographic during the depression, faced serious economic hardship and looked to new avenues for economic change. More important, however, was the fact that the Great

Depression had left a minority of German-Americans in a state of utter alienation. While scores of American communities rallied around the policies and ethos of the New Deal, some Americans of German descent felt that contemporary discourse had excluded them from social acceptance. The Bund, which radically emphasized the value of German heritage, offered these alienated citizens an avenue to express their unpopular love for their homeland and Aryan race, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of American civic duty.

In doing so, the Bund forged a new sense of national identity that borrowed from both German and American political traditions. Projecting German and fascist values onto American historical figures, such as George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, German-Americans found solace in their complicated heritage and validated their belief in a racially-charged biological hierarchy. Naturally, outsiders saw the Bund's hybrid nationalism as a bastardization of the values that real Americans should hold dear, values that also developed in response to the economic and social pressures of the Great Depression. Notions of American perseverance and progress under the Roosevelt administration informed a different understanding of Americanism, and individuals in power, such as the House Committee on Un-American Activities, used this definition to impeach the intentions of the German-American Bund. This ultimately led to false accusations of foreign agency within the Bund. Focusing widespread hatred of National Socialism onto the members of the Bund, federal, state and local officials used public opinion to weaken the Bund and drain its resources, climaxing in the conviction of Fritz Kuhn. As a result, American Nazism, bereft of an effective leader, dwindled into

obscurity and ultimately, inactivity. It remains a prime example of one of the first casualties of the pseudo-legal codification of American identity.

While the Bund's understanding of American nationalism became insignificant in the realm of domestic discourse, HUAC's definition remained highly influential. Investigations into Un-Americanism did not end with the Bund, and individuals of all political persuasions fell victim to the government's superficial notions of ideal citizenry. While the Dies Committee's investigations into communism and other ostensibly subversive ideologies were not the subject of this thesis, an understanding of the ill-fated life of the German-American Bund helps explain the roots of American nationalism and the prominence it took on in the second half of the twentieth century. This is not to suggest that research into the life of American Nazism is by any means complete. The experience of Bundists after the fall of their notorious organization still remains a little-studied topic in American history, and the connections between the German-American Bund and the resurgence of American Nazism in the 1960s have been explored tenuously at best. Ultimately, study of the German-American Bund reveals insight into one of the most vocal and most understudied groups in the history of the United States. The group's life provides revealing insight not only into the magnitude of the Great Depression, but also into the transformation of the United States as a whole, as it emerged from the interwar years with a new and powerful sense of national identity.

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