

Nazi Town USA: US public television examines the German-American Bund in the 1930s

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American Experience, the long-running US public television (PBS) documentary series, devoted a recent program to the German-American Bund, the pro-Nazi organization that attracted tens of thousands of members in the 1930s.

Using archival photos and film and newsreel footage, interspersed with commentary by historians and a few journalists, “Nazi Town USA” traces the development of this extreme anticommunist and antisemitic outfit, adding some social and historical commentary.

The timeliness of the subject is obvious. Donald Trump is preparing his third run for the US presidency, and fascist parties are on the rise around the world. The would-be American Führer is known to have kept a copy of Hitler’s speeches at his bedside, as his language and style suggest.

The extent, however, to which “Nazi Town” sheds light on its important subject is another matter. It suffers, not surprisingly, from an inability to provide a deeper understanding of where the German-American Bund came from. One of the historians interviewed stresses the importance of Nazi ideology and its appeal, but does not begin to lay bare its sources.

Racism, antisemitism and anticommunism, as the film explains, were widespread and officially encouraged in the United States in the period after the First World War. Jim Crow segregation was universal in the states of the old Confederacy, and racial discrimination and mistreatment of African Americans was by no means confined to the South. The Ku Klux Klan numbered some 4 to 5 million members in the 1920s. Automobile pioneer Henry Ford was the country’s most infamous antisemite. He used the *Dearborn Independent* to publish articles based on the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Anti-immigrant campaigns, persisting after the infamous Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, in which thousands of foreign-born radicals and other workers were deported, led to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which established a quota system that meant in practice the virtual elimination of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. The pseudo-science of eugenics was used to argue for white supremacy as a means of increasing “desirable” characteristics in the

population.

The German-American Bund, officially founded in the mid-1930s, based itself on all of the above. Its leader was a German immigrant, Fritz Julius Kuhn, who had emigrated to the US in 1924. Hitler came to power in 1933, and Kuhn became a US citizen around the same time. Meanwhile, the Great Depression had created misery on a vast scale in the US, as elsewhere. This was the period in which the pro-Nazi “radio priest,” Father Coughlin, reached an audience of 14 million in his weekly broadcasts from Royal Oak, Michigan.

Kuhn had ambitions to become an American Führer. The Bund established its headquarters in the Yorkville neighborhood in Manhattan, then home to thousands of German immigrants, but also in the city with by far the largest number of Jews in the US. The organization grew to as many as 100,000 members around the country, including 45 regional districts. As shown in “Nazi Town,” summer youth camps, including Camp Siegfried in suburban Long Island and Camp Nordland in northern New Jersey, became a major focus of its activity. The footage, though fleeting, is also fascinating.

The Bund had several years of growth. By 1938, however, as the Second World War loomed, it attracted more attention from US political and legal authorities. Manhattan District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey, later the Republican Governor and two-time presidential candidate, prosecuted and convicted Kuhn on charges of embezzlement. Apparently, the Bund leader took some \$14,000 of the organization’s funds and spent it on his mistresses and other personal wants. Kuhn was sentenced to prison for 2½ to 5 years.

The Bund’s fortunes were declining before Kuhn’s conviction, and they ended with the war. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, followed immediately by Germany’s declaration of war against the US, put an end to any open pro-Nazi activity. During the previous year, the pro-Nazi elements had a far more polished representative, the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, who headed the America First Committee, with some 800,000 members. Kuhn was later convicted on charges of being an unregistered foreign agent, and was deported in 1945.

The strengths of “Nazi Town” begin with the subject matter itself, the documentary’s reminder of the significance of the German-American Bund and the fact that “it can happen here,” as the famous novel by Sinclair Lewis (*It Can’t Happen Here*) indicated by its ironic title. The Bund recognized the need to cloak its program in the language of American patriotism. “Star-spangled fascism” is the way one of those in the PBS documentary describes it. Another historian explains, correctly, that fascism is above all characterized by ultra-nationalism. “There is no such thing as foreign fascism,” she notes.

Also, as the *American Experience* episode indicates, fascism in Europe, while characterized by virulent antisemitism, especially in Germany, was above all triggered by a reaction to the Russian Revolution of 1917. In words that are not often used today, the film stresses the importance of anticommunism in fascist ideology.

It is therefore significant that when Franklin D. Roosevelt asked for an investigation of the German-American Bund, the 1,000-page report that resulted went nowhere. J. Edgar Hoover, the notorious FBI director for 48 years until his death in 1972, “was not terribly interested” in the subject, the program explains, “because he was a rabid anti-communist.”

Nonetheless, the weaknesses of “Nazi Town” far outweigh its strong points. Above all, it does not explain the source of fascism, its class basis—that powerful sections of the ruling class turn to fascism when faced with the threat of a revolutionary working class.

The class struggle is minimized if not absent in this film. There is no mention of the enormous working class struggles that took place precisely in this period. The great sit-down strikes that led to the mass organization of the CIO began in the Flint, Michigan auto plants on December 30, 1936.

In “Nazi Town,” the real relationship of class forces is completely distorted. While the film speaks of “broad popular support for racism,” Henry Ford is presented as a uniquely pro-Nazi figure within ruling circles. In fact, either openly or behind the scenes, there were many other titans of industry and their political representatives who looked with satisfaction at Mussolini’s regime as well as Hitler’s. Nor was the FBI’s Hoover simply acting on his own. He would not have been able to continue in his powerful post without the tacit or active support of the ruling elite. The government was not, and is not today, some kind of neutral bystander. The source of racism and other forms of reaction is the capitalist system itself, which acts to build up despairing, disoriented petty-bourgeois layers to be used against the working class and the socialist threat.

“Nazi Town” presents the issue as one of a classless “democracy” in battle against fascist dictatorship. Roosevelt and Dewey (if not Hoover) are seen as standing up to the threat of the Bund.

The most graphic illustration of the middle class liberal outlook is in the film’s description of the well-known mass meeting called by the Bund at New York City’s Madison

Square Garden in February 1939. The Nazis brought out more than 20,000 supporters and sympathizers, but 50,000 workers demonstrated outside. The program only briefly mentions the mass protest, in which New York City cops mercilessly attacked demonstrators, many, but by no means all of them, Jewish workers enraged by the Nazi provocation in New York.

Furthermore, the film neglects to point out that these thousands of workers had been mobilized by a massive campaign by the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in the US at the time. The Stalinists of the Communist Party, then at the peak of their influence, with tens of thousands of members and sympathizers in the New York City area, opposed the working-class mobilization against the Nazis, as did the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas. The Trotskyists demonstrated the crucial role of leadership in this episode. The PBS program buries it.

While Trump’s name is not mentioned in this examination of 20th century history, the lessons of 90 years ago are obviously crucial today. The 2024 election, only a little more than 9 months away, is shaping up as a rematch between warmonger and genocide backer Joe Biden and fascist demagogue Trump. American capitalism does not have the resources today that enabled Roosevelt to advance a reformist program, limited though it was, 85 years ago. The Democratic Party has been unmasked as the handmaiden of fascism, not its enemy. The fight against fascism can only begin with the break with the two capitalist parties that fundamentally share the same program when it comes to the working class: war, austerity and dictatorship.

“Nazi Town USA” is presently available for viewing in the United States on the PBS website. While it contains some valuable historical testimony, it should come with a warning label—its gaps and distortions need to be kept in mind.



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