

FRITZ KUHN, "THE AMERICAN FUEHRER" AND THE RISE AND FALL
OF THE GERMAN-AMERICAN BUND

By

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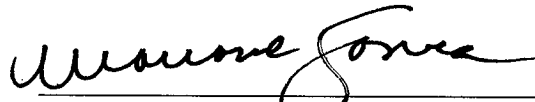
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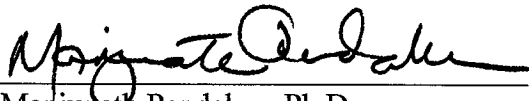
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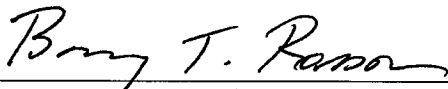
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ABSTRACT

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It is not generally known that a pro-Nazi organization, the German-American Bund, held sway among certain segments of American society during the 1920s and 1930s. The organization achieved its greatest successes after the self-proclaimed “American Fuehrer,” Fritz Julius Kuhn, took up the reigns of leadership in 1936. Under Kuhn’s leadership, the Bund saw a dramatic increase in its membership rolls; it is estimated that over 25,000 dues-paying members belonged to this first-ever National Socialist organization created outside the environs of Nazi Germany. This thesis explores reasons why this blatantly pro-Nazi organization thrived in the bastion of democracy. While most historians attribute other reasons for the Bund’s success, this thesis argues that it was the outstanding organizational skills of Kuhn that kept the movement alive in the years prior to World War II.

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INTRODUCTION

On February 20, 1939, some 22,000 exuberant members of a Nazi organization awaited anxiously for the arrival of their national leader. Seated in the huge auditorium, many in the crowd sported Nazi lapel pins and swastika armbands. Cries of “Sieg Heil!” could be heard resonating throughout the throng. On the stage stood an honor guard of men dressed in storm trooper attire. Several of the men held flags emblazoned with German writing and with swastikas. A band stationed directly in front of the stage played songs favored by the German Reich.

This gathering of Nazis was taking place not in Hitler’s Germany, but in Madison Square Garden in New York City. Those attending the rally were not German, but German American, and the rally was being held under the auspices of the German American Bund. This convocation of pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic Americans was the brainchild of the national leader, the “Bundesfuehrer,” Fritz Julius Kuhn.

A study of Fritz Kuhn and his impact and influence on the movement is necessary because leading historians on the subject of Kuhn and the movement fail to acknowledge how important his leadership skills were to its relative success.

Several published works on the Bund focus on its infancy, growth, and demise, but tend to gloss over Kuhn’s true significance in the shaping and strengthening of the organization into a viable entity. In fact, historian Leo Ribuffo comes closest to giving “credit where credit is due” when he states that, “instead of disintegrating, [the Bund]

enjoyed a three-year renaissance under new management.”¹ Unfortunately, he does not delve further into the reasons why Fritz Kuhn was able to bring new life to the organization on the heels of Hitler’s decree that all German nationals must immediately withdraw from membership in the Friends of New Germany, precursor to the Bund. Other works dealing with Kuhn and the Bund are also found wanting in the portrayal of Kuhn’s leadership style as the sole cause of the rejuvenation of the organization between 1936 and 1939. The history of Kuhn’s rise within the organization is well documented by such historians as Susan Canedy, Sander Diamond, Marvin Miller, Warren Grover, Leland Bell, and a host of others, but none of those works specifically focus on Kuhn’s leadership style as the “engine” that powered the growth of the German American Bund.

Canedy writes in *America’s Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (1990) that “under Kuhn’s leadership the Bund achieved national notoriety. . . the German American Bund, in fact, was Fritz Kuhn.”² Kuhn’s leadership, according to Canedy, was based on the concept of the *Fuehrerprinzip* (Leadership Principle), which required unquestioning, absolute obedience. Therefore, a prerequisite of membership was adherence to this precept. Canedy’s statement is telling when she writes that, “mobilized by Kuhn’s powerful invectives, the Bund marched as one.”³ Thus, Canedy recognizes Kuhn as a domineering force, wherein the membership accepts his leadership based upon edicts.

¹ Leo Ribuffo, “Fascists, Nazis and American Minds: Perceptions and Preconceptions,” review of *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*, by John P. Diggins; *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*, by Sander A. Diamond; *In Hitler’s Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism*, by Leland Bell; *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower*, by Sheldon Marcus, *American Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (October 1974), 423, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711656> (accessed September 10, 2008).

² Susan Canedy, *America’s Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park, CA., 1990), 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 128.

She also recognizes that he is a manipulator of facts, particularly as it involved his relationship with Adolf Hitler, whom Kuhn had met in 1936. Although Hitler met Kuhn out of courtesy and the meeting itself was only a matter of minutes, Kuhn exploited the meeting, leaving Bund members with the perception that Kuhn had a more intimate relationship with Hitler than actually existed.

Of course, this was a powerful marketing tool for Kuhn to use when looking to add to his membership roles. Although Canedy makes the case that Kuhn used aspects of his ability and his Machiavellian personality to create a more notable organization than had previously existed, she does not bring those facets together to give full credit to Kuhn, and to Kuhn alone, for the “renaissance” of the Bund during the period 1936-1939.

In *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941* (1974), Sander A. Diamond offers an in-depth analysis of the rise of the pro-Nazi movement, culminating in the German American Bund under Fritz Kuhn. According to Diamond, by 1936 the idea that a fascist Europe seemed within the realm of possibility. Diamond writes that, “this belief gave Kuhn’s Volksbund its momentum.”⁴ He does credit Kuhn with adding a new element that did not exist in earlier incarnations of the organization: “Kuhn infused a new ingredient into the movement-sensationalism, which was merely an extension of his personality.”⁵

Diamond minimizes Kuhn’s gifts of leadership in favor of the supposition that the only reason the Bund flourished during the Kuhn years was the “sensationalism”

⁴ Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974), 204.

⁵ Ibid.

that the he brought to the mix. He discounts Kuhn's other attributes that this thesis contends were present and inherently necessary for the Bund movement to succeed. These characteristics were not present in the leadership of the pre-Bund movements nor in the movement as it existed after Kuhn was arrested and sent to prison.

In fact, Kuhn's character traits are described in almost antagonistic terms: "His appearance and flamboyant style help to explain why so many persons thought him more a buffoon than a leader."⁶ That said, Diamond reverses himself by writing that, "[Kuhn] created a powerful cultic organization, making his name synonymous with the group. . . during the Fritz Kuhn years, the American Nazi Bund changed from a factionalized and ineffective group to the instrument of an active movement."⁷ In transforming Kuhn from a buffoon to a cult figure, Diamond, like Canedy, does not explain what it was about Kuhn's leadership that empowered the organization to "find its footing" instead of floundering as it had before Kuhn arrived on the scene, and as it would after he was gone.

Numerous journals and periodicals were reviewed for inclusion in this thesis, and several primary and secondary articles were found to be most relevant to the subject matter. To reiterate, major historians have utilized these primary and secondary sources as a means to reach their conclusion, to wit: The perceived threat of the German American Bund was greater than the actual threat. No work reviewed for this thesis focuses on the idea that Fritz Kuhn's incarnation of the Bund molded that perception (or misperception) of the American government and the American public that the organization was more dangerous to American interests than was truly the case.

⁶ Ibid., 205.

⁷ Ibid., 207.

The growth of the German American Bund under Fritz Kuhn and the ultimate failure of Nazism in America is discussed in Leland V. Bell's, "The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund, 1936-1941." Bell makes the point that the Bund neither warranted the attention it received nor ever presented a threat to American institutions.⁸ This is an interesting perspective in hindsight, but the fact remains that public perception of the Bund at the time was one of fear and intimidation, brought about by the efforts of Kuhn and his henchmen. Bell refuses to give Kuhn his due when he writes that "it required considerable political acumen to build an association which had been repudiated in America and Germany (The Friends of New Germany), and Kuhn and other Bund leaders soon proved that they lacked such astuteness and moderation."⁹ He does acknowledge that through Kuhn's efforts (marketing, advertisement, community meetings, speeches, marches et. al.), there was a large increase in meeting attendance and in the membership rolls. Bell does not, though, make any concessions to Kuhn's efforts. Kuhn's "genius", as it were, was to transform what had been an organization of German nationals touting Hitlerism and Nazi ideology into an outwardly "pro-American" association. This new incarnation mixed tenets of Nazism and its blatant anti-Semitism with "Americana" and a hatred of Communism. The Bund's advertised *raison d'être* was to fight against the communist threat while bringing "wholesome" German values to the German American community. It also wanted close ties with the Germany and the German government. Although Kuhn was wholly unsuccessful in every one of these measures, it need not discount the fact that

⁸ Leland V. Bell, "The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund," 1936-1941, *Political Science Quarterly* 85 (1970), 585, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2147597> (accessed July 1, 2009).

⁹ *Ibid*, 586.

but for his efforts, the Bund would have disappeared rather than grow and become the perceived threat it represented during the Kuhn years.

Historian Martha Glaser also studied the impact on the German American Bund on New Jersey in her 1974 article, “The German American Bund in New Jersey.” According to Glaser, the Friends of New Germany (predecessor organization to the Bund), at the time it was disbanded had a membership of between 5,000 and 6,500.¹⁰ This was a far cry from the nearly 25,000 members who belonged to the Bund under the leadership of Kuhn. Glaser writes that although there was increased anti-German sentiment in the United States in the late 1930s, it did not stop Kuhn from increasing the visibility of the organization: “By 1937, the Bund had become very visible indeed.”¹¹ In referring to the opening of Camp Nordland in New Jersey that same year, she writes, “On one occasion that summer, eighteen thousand persons were reported to be at the camp.” Interestingly, the focus of Glaser’s article is on the legal problems encountered by the Bund throughout its existence. Although she discusses the success of the Bund in light of the growing membership roll, she spends no time writing about Kuhn’s leadership abilities, which led to the increase in those numbers.

Joachim Remak, an historian and an expert on the German American Bund and Kuhn’s rise through the ranks analyzes the factors that contributed to the growth of the Bund’s predecessor organization, the Friends of New Germany in “Friends of the New Germany: The Bund and German American Relations.” His article, written upon the release of recently declassified documents, focuses on the disruption to German-

¹⁰ Martha Glaser, “The German American Bund in New Jersey,” *New Jersey History* 92, no. 1 (1974), 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

American relations caused by the Friends of New Germany and its successor organization, the German American Bund. He details a March 1, 1938 announcement that forbade German citizens to be members of the Bund (a reiteration of the 1935 order requiring all German nationals to leave the Friends of New Germany on threat of losing their German citizenship). Remak writes that “far from disbanding the Bund [as a result of the March 1 order], Kuhn. . . misled his followers by confusing them about the intent of the foreign ministry’s order and by boasting about his uninterrupted influence with the German Nazi leaders.”¹² Rather than see Kuhn’s lie as an effort to keep the Bund alive and growing, he denigrates Kuhn’s deceitfulness. Yet, Remak does quote Kuhn as stating to Hitler’s aide, Captain Fritz Wiedemann, that if his [Kuhn’s] work was undesirable, he would disband the Bund. In answer to this, Wiedemann told Kuhn that he was not authorized to give any instructions regarding the disbanding of the organization.¹³

Ronald W. Johnson discusses Kuhn’s reputation within the Nazi hierarchy in “The German American Bund and Nazi Germany: 1936-1941.” As in the previous writers’ analyses, Johnson concludes that Kuhn was an impediment to Nazi Germany’s attempts at “friendship” with the United States government. Johnson does touch upon Kuhn’s efforts at revitalizing the Bund in light of the dismantling of the Friends of New Germany: “Kuhn did his utmost to attract the support of the Fatherland, Americans of German origin, and isolationists.”¹⁴ He also states that Kuhn’s “schemes” did, for a

¹² Joachim Remak, “Friends of New Germany: The Bund and German-American Relations,” *The Journal of Modern History* 29, no. 1 (March 1957), 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴ Ronald W. Johnson, “The German American Bund and Nazi Germany: 1936-1941,” *Studies in History and Society* 6, no.2 (Spring 1975), 31.

time, work towards the growth of the Bund. Those so-called schemes were in fact necessary in order to build the Bund's numbers, although as with other writers who have reviewed the Kuhn years, little credit is given to Kuhn's methods utilized in reconstituting the movement.

Fritz Kuhn's "stature" as a (supposed) Hitler confidante, the peril posed by the German American Bund and the implications of Hollywood's entry into the world of anti-Nazi propaganda is analyzed by Eric J. Sandeen in his article, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy and the German-American Bund." Sandeen makes the case that Hollywood assisted Kuhn in enlarging the scope and reach of the Bund through the release of its faux semi-documentary, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy."

He credits Kuhn with ingenuity not discussed in many other works on the Bund: "Fritz Kuhn displayed his naturalized American ingenuity by merely changing the name of the [previous] organization to the German American Bund, thereby circumventing the order [of the German Foreign Office] and retaining about 90 percent of the Friends' membership."¹⁵ He also points out that due to the Bund's "irascibility," the Bund enlarged its recognition factor: "The Bund newspaper received attention disproportionate to its circulation of 5,000."¹⁶ Most tellingly, Sandeen goes a step further than most writers in giving credit to Kuhn for his leadership skills when he writes that, "the ingenuity of Kuhn also figured in the influence of the Bund. When his support was waning, he organized an Honor America Rally in Madison Square Garden . . . the fact that the Bund successfully packed 20,000 people made the organization

¹⁵ Eric J. Sandeen, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy and the German-American Bund," *Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 2 (1979), 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

seem very powerful when the American people saw the event in newsreel form.”¹⁷

Bruce M. Ashkenas conducted extensive research into the Bund’s and Kuhn’s financial records and correspondence, relating his findings to the relative success of the Bund. He discusses his findings in “A Legacy of Hatred: The Records of a Nazi Organization in America.” Ashkenas traveled to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. to analyze all of the extant Friends of New Germany and German American Bund documentation housed there. What is interesting is his unequivocal statements that “the Bund enjoyed its period of greatest growth under the leadership of Bundesfuehrer Fritz Kuhn. . . although the Bund was not much of a factor in the national consciousness after Kuhn was sent to prison in 1939.”¹⁸ Among Kuhn’s innovations that filled the coffers of the Bund were the opening of summer camps, the creation of several corporations catering to both German Americans and German nationals, and expanded printing facilities to blanket the cities where the organization members resided with newspapers, leaflets, and pamphlets. Ashkenas appears to confirm that Kuhn was the lynchpin that gave new life to the moribund Friends of New Germany and that upon his departure, the organization returned to stagnating state until its final demise at the end of 1941.

Additional secondary sources utilized for this thesis include Marvin A. Miller’s *Wunderlich’s Salute* (discussed below); Donald Warren’s *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio* (1996), which focuses on Father Coughlin as the first media celebrity to erase the distinction between religion, politics, and mass media. Bund records indicate that both Kuhn’s and Coughlin’s followers interacted at

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bruce Ashkenas, “A Legacy of Hatred: The Records of A Nazi Organization in America,” *Prologue; The Journal of the National Archives* 17, no.2 (Summer 1985), 96-97.

several levels. Although there is no documentation indicating that Kuhn and Coughlin ever met face to face, it is reasonable to believe that both groups were given the approval to interact from their leaders. When one reads Coughlin's words, it is easy to ascertain the affinity he felt for the Bund. In describing the Madison Square Garden rally, Coughlin said, "The swastika and the Stars and Stripes were proudly displayed on the platform."¹⁹

Walter Winchell labeled Coughlin the "Darling of the Bundists."²⁰ If Kuhn did indeed form an alliance with Coughlin's followers as the records seem to indicate, it would provide further evidence that Kuhn, unlike his predecessors, sought to expand Bund influence outside the German national and German-American sphere. Leland V. Bell's *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (1973) is a study that spotlights the origins of the American Nazi movement in the 1920s and follows the movement's development and fascist trends through the 1970s. Unlike other writers who spend but little time discussing Kuhn's attributes as a leader, Bell does focus more on his stewardship of the Bund: "The years 1936 and 1937 brought a marked increase in the fortunes of American National Socialism. Fritz Kuhn *molded* [italics mine] the German American Bund into an aggressive organization, far surpassing the friends of New Germany in dedication and militancy."²¹ Charles Higham's *American Swastika: The Shocking Story of Nazi Collaborators in our Midst from 1933 to the Present Day* (1985) is a chronological narrative that explores the major events in the growth of the

¹⁹ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 177.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

²¹ Leland Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Port Washington, NY: Kenikat Press, 1973), 19.

American Nazi movement throughout the twentieth century discusses Kuhn's "powers of persuasion" through his speeches: "Kuhn would address the crowds with wild enthusiasm, whipping up feverish excitement."²² This contributed to the psychological appeal of the movement, particularly to the young men whom Kuhn hoped to enlist in the ranks of the Bund. It must be remembered that none of the leaders who came before Kuhn were able to draw together the disparate cells located in New York, New Jersey, and other parts of the country. Only under Kuhn was this goal accomplished: "[The Bund] was better organized, centralized, and financed."²³

The history of Fritz Kuhn's tenure as leader of the German American Bund is drawn primarily from primary documentation obtained from the Federal Bureau of Investigation through the Freedom of Information Act. Although the authors of works that have been published on the Bund have utilized sources that could be obtained through the Act, none of those sources were utilized to answer the question of whether Fritz Kuhn was the sole reason that the Bund flourished in the years 1936-1939. Thus, the focus of this paper will capitalize on the access to these primary documents to answer that question.

The new material was obtained in 2003 through the purchase of documents owned by author Marvin D. Miller, and through a written request to the Federal Bureau of Investigation between 2003 and 2008. Additional primary documentation that discuss Kuhn's influence upon the Bund include: the series of edicts handed down by Kuhn (referred to as "*Bund Orders*"), *New York Times* articles, federal and state court

²² Charles Higham, *American Swastika: The Shocking Story of Nazi Collaborators in Our Midst from 1933 to the Present Day* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985), 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

proceedings, United States Government documents relating to the United States House of Representatives Select Committee on Un-American Activities (1934 and 1939), and the *United States Congressional Record*, through which the debate concerning the potential danger to America posed by the German American Bund was discussed.

Mr. Miller, a high school teacher and researcher, wrote a seminal history of the German-American Bund's Nazi "children's summer camps." Miller's book, *Wunderlich's Salute* (1983), mentioned above, delves into the creation, administration, and activities of the children's camps that were opened in New York and New Jersey in the late 1930s. The children's camps were the brainchild of Kuhn, who felt that if he could involve the children to a greater extent, parents normally on the perimeter of the movement would become more involved. Miller wrote that Kuhn was the type of leader the Bund needed at that time in the movement's history: "He was a strong personality, a man endowed with considerable force and intelligence and with a lot of personal magnetism."²⁴

Americans in the 1930s received news updates on a regular basis about Bund activities through reports published in *The New York Times*. None of its articles published between 1936 and 1941 focused on Fritz Kuhn's essential role in extending the life and vibrancy of the German American Bund. FBI and Department of Justice documents, made available to me through the Freedom of Information Act show little attempt to analyze the Bund's continued growth in light of Fritz Kuhn's leadership abilities. In fact, much of the extant documentation from the 1938-1939 period, and specifically memorandums to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, do not discern the root

²⁴ Marvin D. Miller, *Wunderlich's Salute* (New York: Malamud-Rose Publishers, 1983), 93.

cause of the Bund's strength.²⁵ Of the hundreds of pages of documents reviewed for this thesis, the language which best indicates the lack of understanding that both institutions had in regards to Kuhn's importance to the movement originates in a memo from Deputy Director E. A. Tamm to J. Edgar Hoover, written on April 8, 1939. Tamm writes that although it might be possible to stop Kuhn's application for a passport (for an upcoming trip to Germany) as a result of the investigation into Kuhn's violation of the Agents of Foreign Principals Act, there was really no pressing need to do so, and that he is of the opinion that, "it is not in our interest in stopping his passport."²⁶

Supplementary documentation provided by Miller include documents obtained from New York state and local jurisdictions including the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law, which investigated Kuhn and his business dealings; United States Department of Justice (Immigration and Naturalization Service, Outline of Evidence), which started proceedings to revoke Kuhn's citizenship based on alleged subversive activities, and pamphlets authored by Kuhn including the Speeches of the German American Bund, German American Bund Incorporation papers, By-Laws of the German American Bund and its Subsidiaries, German American Bund Aims and Purposes, and the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* newspaper, published by the Bund.

Further primary materials employed in the research include Congressman Martin Dies' (chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities) *The Trojan Horse in America* (1940), which illuminates Kuhn's worldview and pro-Nazi

²⁵ The said memorandums deal primarily with the FBI and Department of Justice's attempts to destroy the German American Bund by claiming that Bund members had not registered as Agents of Foreign Principals (i.e. Nazi Germany).

²⁶ E.A. Tamm Memorandum to J. Edgar Hoover, April 8, 1939.

stance, and F.B.I undercover agent John Roy Carlson's *Under Cover* (1943), whose undercover work gave testament to Kuhn's pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic stance.

The trials and tribulations that occurred during the hearings of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, more commonly known as the "Dies Committee," are investigated by scholar and lecturer D.A. Saunders in "The Dies Committee: First Phase." The Dies Committee's influence on public opinion following the first year of hearings is analyzed by psychologist Dr. Steuart Henderson Britt and sociologist Dr. Selden C. Menefee in "Did the Publicity of the Dies Committee in 1938 Influence Public Opinion?"

Although the Congressional Hearings provide ample primary source material for investigating the activities of the German-American Bund and its predecessors, there was a recognition that the Hearings themselves were insufficient to end the organization's activities. Both the McCormack Committee and its successor, the Dies Committee, garnered the public's attention in attempting to destroy the Bund. The members of the McCormack Committee proceeded to charge the Bund with subversion because of its dissemination of Nazi propaganda, while those on the Dies Committee attempted to find Bund members, and Fritz Kuhn specifically, guilty of treason. Both efforts were for naught. The McCormack investigation ended its year of existence with little to show for its efforts, having produced no indictments and having failed to raise the public's ire against the Friends of New Germany, the Bund's immediate predecessor. The Dies investigation, although much broader in scope and established with a mission to "get" Fritz Kuhn among other things, failed miserably as well.

Inexplicably, after only two interviews with members of the German-American Bund, the committee turned its attention to Communist infiltration in the United States. It appears from the record that Kuhn “dodged a bullet” through no effort of his own, but through the Dies Committee’s lack of commitment towards bringing down the Bund in favor of hunting down and exposing the perceived communist threat that was prevalent before the war.

The committee did finally return to the issue of destroying Kuhn and the Bund, but not before others who had a similar desire intervened. The Dies Committee did in fact serve a purpose, though; it acted (unknowingly) as a red herring that took Kuhn’s attention away from the real threat to his leadership, and indeed to his freedom. That threat came from the mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, who with his masterful district attorney Thomas E. Dewey, finally dethroned the American Fuehrer with charges of tax evasion and embezzlement.

The research indicates that scholars of who have published books or articles over the last fifty years have seldom utilized the available primary documentation to make the case that Fritz Kuhn was the lifeblood of the German American Bund. Most historians have minimized his impact on the growth of the Bund, or they have relegated him to the status of a buffoon. This thesis hopes to add to the dearth of published materials on the leadership skills of Fritz Kuhn and why he was essential to the growth of the German American Bund. To reiterate, major historians have not focused on the fact that the perceived threat of the German American Bund, greater than the actual threat, was the direct result of Fritz Kuhn’s skills in molding public opinion and perception.

This thesis will consist of four chapters that detail the following: first, the origins and predecessors of the German American Bund in the United States; second, the rise of Fritz Kuhn and the methods he used to gain and maintain power to run his organization; third, the heyday of the Bund; and fourth, the events that led to the collapse of Kuhn and ultimately, to the Bund itself. This work will endeavor to show that the leadership and multiple other skills of Fritz Kuhn were necessary and vital to the thriving existence of the German American Bund in the years 1936 to 1939. Neither the Bund's predecessor organizations nor its successor – run by several of Kuhn's lieutenants – were able to maintain the political, social, and cultural vibrancy which was attained under the regime of Fritz Julius Kuhn, who during his period of leadership, came to be known as "The American Fuehrer."

CHAPTER ONE

The Rise of The American Fuehrer

In order to understand the development of what came to be known as the German American Bund and Fritz Kuhn's role in it, it is necessary to review the origins of the two organizations that preceded it. The first of these was the National-Socialist-influenced "Free Society of Teutonia" which was founded in 1924 and second, the "Friends of New Germany" (FONG), which was created in 1933. Both had the goal of advancing German language and culture in the US. The leadership of the latter strove to ingratiate itself into the circle of Germany's new leader, Adolf Hitler. They also, as will be detailed in this chapter, chose to model themselves after the German Nazis in various ways, both symbolically and through the creation of Nazi-inspired military units. Both groups suffered the disability of being peopled almost entirely by German nationals, i.e. people who were not U.S. citizens. This fact raised public and congressional suspicion against them and resulted in extensive investigation by what was known as the McCormack Commission.

The fears raised by the Commission in 1934 – that a treasonous Germany-funded "Fifth Column" was operating in the US – so harmed German-American relations that Hitler himself, still wanting to preserve cordial relations between the two countries, ordered all German nationals to leave FONG. The leader of FONG, a German citizen by the name of Fritz Gissibl, came to the conclusion that only by concentrating

on German-American citizens and showing a more “patriotic” profile could the group grow sufficiently to overcome both US fears and the earlier threats made by Hitler. Fritz Kuhn, who succeeded Gissibl after a period of strong intra-party fighting, agreed. He renamed the organization “The German American Bund” to make it sound less threatening and began to market the group more toward US citizens of German background. With these steps Fritz Kuhn, whose background will be described here, began to take the Bund to the height of its success and prosperity.

Fritz Gissibl began the organization that eventually evolved into the “German American Bund” with a relatively simple philosophy. That belief was separatism and the idea of the primacy of German language and culture. Approximately 430,000 German immigrants had arrived in the United States between 1919 and 1933.²⁷ Among the many hundreds of thousands of German expatriates to arrive at America’s shores were a statistically negligible group of malcontents, which Susan Canedy, a scholar of Nazi influence in America, describes as “young zealots, members of the lost generation of Germany.”²⁸ These newcomers were primarily the dispossessed, those who had endured the altered reality of lives changed for the worse after the German defeat in World War I and the establishment of the Weimar Republic.²⁹

In October 1924, the first incarnation of the German-American Bund was organized by these “malcontents” in Detroit. Committed to and informed by the tenets and ideology of early National Socialism, the *Nationalsozialistische Vereinigung Teutonis*, otherwise known by its English appellation, the *National Socialist Teutonia*

²⁷ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 97.

²⁸ Canedy, *America’s Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park CA., 1990), 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37

Association (Teutonia) or more simply, *The Free Society of Teutonia*, was the first National Socialist organization set up in the United States.³⁰

The organizers of Teutonia, Fritz and Peter Gissibl, Alfred Ex, and Frank von Friedersdorff were rabid followers of the philosophy of National Socialism as advocated by Adolf Hitler, who was gaining in strength and power at the time in Germany. Hitler had named his group the National Socialist German Workers' Party, whose acronym in German was "NSDAP" or simply "Nazi." Their marketing of Teutonia included the publishing of handbills and pamphlets, as well as a Party newspaper, the *Vorposten*. Its members collected and sent money to the NSDAP in Munich and attracted a following of approximately five hundred members, a relatively small number.³¹

Whether it was through a malaise on the part of its leadership or a disinterest on the part of American anti-Semites, Teutonia was unable to make the social or political connections that would serve to stimulate its growth. Although member cells had spread to several cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Cincinnati, the organization was unable to consolidate the movement under strong leadership. Teutonia lacked the cohesion and credibility necessary to form a viable organization. So why then is Teutonia of interest if it did not impact the social or political fiber of the United States?

It is because Teutonia served as a training ground for leaders influenced organizations yet such as Fritz Gissibl, Heinz Spanknoebel, and Gissibl's protégé, Fritz Julius Kuhn. All three would lead larger Nazi-influenced organizations in the future.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid.

Teutonia served its purpose in the short-term. It offered members, many of whom had come from Germany after the war with nothing but the clothes on their backs, both empathy and sympathy. The organization also offered a reason for their current dilemma since many of them swallowed the anti-Semitic belief that all of their problems had been caused by a Jewish-capitalist plot, which was described in detail in the anti-Semitic publication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The Protocols, first anti-Semitic Russia of Czar Nicholas II, describe a world-wide effort by Jews to take over financial institutions and the media in order to gain complete control over the world economy and social order.³²

Teutonia's ideology grew darker and more perverse with the times. Beginning with the onset of the Depression, and throughout the remainder of its existence as an independent organization, the group slowly transformed itself from a German-American coterie of the disenchanted and dispossessed to a hardened group of anti-Semitic National Socialists. Taking its cues from the German National Socialists, Teutonia fixed all blame for the loss of the war and the "disaster" of Weimar on international Jewry. Fritz Gissibl, an earlier leader of Teutonia, felt that the next step in adding to the growth of the movement was to transplant the headquarters of Teutonia from Detroit to a more centralized city where contact with other American Nazi organizations would be more conducive. He was certain that there was no better place than New York to build a command center, one that could provide the raw materials and the manpower necessary to build a strong, successful organization. Therefore, in the spring of 1933, Gissibl and his second-in-command, Heinz Spanknoebel, created the Friends of New Germany

³² Steven L. Jacobs, *Dismantling the Big Lie: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 2003), 4.

(FONG) from the membership of Teutonia and other German immigrants residing in the New York - New Jersey area. To keep in line those breakaway organizations who still refused to join, the two created a fighting force called the Ordnungsdienst (O-D) Uniformed Service.³³ The Service, modeled after Hitler's security force, the S.S., also served the useful purpose of keeping those within the organization in line as well.

Despite the German Nazis' message of Aryan supremacy, blatant anti-Semitism, and other distasteful convictions, the German leadership had attempted to sway American public opinion in favor of National Socialism. Beginning in May 1933, Minister of Propaganda Dr. Joseph Goebbels hired a public-relations firm to "explain" National Socialism to the American people. This move was made even more necessary by the boycott of German products initiated by American Jews, who had gotten wind of the mistreatment of German Jews and the German boycott of Jewish goods and services. This "counterboycott" would be the American Jewish response: "Unfortunately for German Jewry," writes Warren Grover, "the spreading [American] boycott did not curb Hitler's anti-Semitism; instead it reinforced Hitler's belief that Jews controlled the world economy."³⁴

The leadership of the Third Reich in Europe still felt that a pro-Nazi case could be made to an enlightened American public. However, the Nazis' case was weakened by the constant fighting that Gissibl and Spanknoebel allowed their "troops" to instigate within the United States. The worst of these broke out in Newark in October 1933. The Schwabenhalle riot, as it came to be known, between pro and anti-Nazi supporters, resulted in immediate retaliation by Newark's mayor. He cancelled German Day

³³ Warren Grover, *Nazis in Newark* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

celebrations, which had been scheduled for October 29. This prompted Spanknoebel and the organization's pro-Nazi associates, including the Reverend William Popcke, to vehemently protest the mayor's action. They declared that if the mayor called off German Day celebrations, then their constitutional rights would be violated.³⁵

O'Brien and other city officials were not impressed. At first viewed as trouble-makers within the German-American community, officials began to perceive that the Friends of New Germany was a threat to American democracy. Concerned about the potential menace to society, members of the United States Congress, led by Representative Samuel Dickstein of Brooklyn, took matters into their own hands. Dickstein, who was also chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, requested the deportation of Gissibl and Spanknoebel on the grounds that they had "failed to register with the State Department as agents of a foreign government."³⁶

It is not known if Spanknoebel somehow learned of the impending deportation hearing, but he did not show up for a scheduled meeting with Mayor O'Brien on October twenty-fifth. In fact, Spanknoebel had gone into hiding, and four days later, the same day that the German Day celebrations were to have been held, he secretly left the country on the *S.S. Europa*.³⁷

In less than then five months, Heinz Spanknoebel, along with Gissibl, had accomplished much. He had organized a Nazi party in the United States, created military and press sections of the movement, and had peopled the leadership ranks with

³⁵ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 131.

³⁶ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 53.

³⁷ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 132.

hard-core Nazis loyal to the NSDAP. On the other hand, according to Grover, he had antagonized many influential leaders in New York's German-American community, exposed the Friends to an enormous amount of negative publicity, and awakened the United States government to the threat of a militant foreign-backed force in its midst.³⁸

Following Spanknoebel's ignominious departure, Gissibl declared himself "Bundesleiter" (Bund leader). His first order of business was to blunt his former partner's impact on the movement, and hopefully, the repercussions that were in motion as a result. Canedy writes that "Gissibl, in an effort to thwart [Congressman Samuel] Dickstein's impending Congressional investigation, adopted a move to 'Americanize' the Friends."³⁹

In a move that the new Bundesleiter hoped would contribute to the growth of the movement, he authorized the removal of his name from the roles of the NSDAP membership and began naturalization proceedings. Of course, Gissibl hoped that these tactical moves would help the American public to disassociate the Nazi Party in America from Germany, which would no longer be held culpable for the American Nazi Party's actions.

It must be remembered that although the American Nazi Party was modeled on the NSDAP of Nazi Germany, there was no intention to reproduce, in any wholesale way, Nazism in America. Gissibl and his cohorts were under no illusions. They realized that the political situations in the two countries were completely different. The best the American Nazis could hope for, Gissibl and his associates believed, was to create a potential "Fifth Column" that would undermine the loyalty to the United States

³⁸ Grover, *Nazis in Newark*, 79.

³⁹ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 54.

of certain sympathetic segments of society. In attempting to infiltrate these segments, Gissibl wanted to avoid the potential negative ramifications his movement's efforts would have vis-à-vis American public opinion turning against Nazi Germany.

Despite Gissibl's best efforts to take the "heat" off of the Friends of New Germany, Congressman Dickstein continued to proceed with his investigation of the organization. The House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Dickstein, was the result of an earlier independent investigation that Dickstein had launched in mid-1933. The results of his investigation indicated that the Nazi government had growing influence in the United States. Indeed, Dickstein uncovered the fact that many of the German immigrants who had arrived immediately after the war were in fact sent to spread propaganda about the Nazi Party.

The facts uncovered by the independent investigation convinced Dickstein that a full Congressional investigation was in order. In March 1934, the House of Representatives established a committee to examine subversive propaganda with a special focus on the extent, character and objectives of Nazi propaganda. The questions to be answered concerned not only how widespread the Nazi movement was in the United States, but what impact the movement was having on the American public's psyche.

John McCormack, (who later became Speaker of the House), chaired the committee, and Samuel Dickstein served as vice-chair. Both men approached the investigation in different ways. Dr. Francis MacDonnell notes that Congressman McCormack performed his job in a cautious and responsible fashion. He avoided sensational public accusations and held most of the committee's hearings in closed

executive sessions.⁴⁰ Dickstein, in contrast, behaved in a less confined fashion. Taking on the guise of an alarmist, Dickstein spent his time on the committee trumpeting the dangers of Nazism in general, and American Nazism specifically. Dickstein voiced alarm at the extent of Nazi activities in the United States, exaggerated the Friends of New Germany's strength by claiming there were ten times as many members as there actually were, and accused the NSDAP in Berlin of smuggling weapons to Nazi sympathizers in the United States.⁴¹

The committee, which became the forerunner of the more famous "Dies Committee," investigated many aspects of Nazi infiltration and influence in America. One subcommittee researched the influx of Nazi propaganda material provided through the auspices of the I.G. Farben Company, a conglomerate of German chemical companies. One of the witnesses examined by the McCormack Committee was Mr. Ivy L. Lee, a well-known public relations counsel.⁴² Lee testified that he had been hired by both the American Division and the German Division of I.G. Farben. Through intense questioning, Lee admitted that through his connections within the German Division, he had been brought in to advise the Nazi government on how best to promote German policies in the United States. He also admitted that his travels to Germany allowed him access to the top Nazi echelon, including Minister of Propaganda Goebbels, Vice-Chancellor Von Papen, Foreign Minister Von Neurath, and Minister of Economics Schmidt.

Lee ultimately admitted that he had met with Hitler for more than half an hour to

⁴⁰ Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (Oxford University Press, N.Y., 2004), 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Howard Watson Ambruster, *Treason's Peace* (The Beechurst Press, N.Y., 1947), 195.

discuss German-American relations: “I asked him some questions about his policies, told him I would like better to understand him if I could, and he made quite a speech.”⁴³ Lee had agreed with Hitler that German promotional i.e. propaganda materials would be sent back to the United States through the marketing division of American I.G. Farben. These would include literature in the form of books, pamphlets, newspaper clippings and documents. When Congressman Dickstein queried Mr. Lee about one extremely large shipment of propaganda that had been shipped from Germany on the steamship Bremen, Mr. Lee had no independent recollection of the delivery. It seemed very peculiar to the committee members, as the addressee of the shipment was “Ivy Lee & Co., New York.”⁴⁴

Throughout 1934 and into 1935, the McCormick Commission continued to delve into the issue of Nazi influence in the United States. During its existence, the committee’s work drew wide-spread support from across the American spectrum. On the other hand, as might be expected, many German Americans took great umbrage that such proceedings were taking place at all. The German American press labeled the Committee the “Jewish Inquisition,” and labeled Dickstein America’s number one “German hater.”⁴⁵ Perhaps it was the potential for this type of reaction that kept Dickstein from becoming the chairman of the committee and kept other congressmen in that role. Dickstein’s Jewish background would have been fodder for those who would accuse the government of anti-German sentiment, kindled by Jewish resentment of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany.

⁴³ Ibid., 195-196.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁵ Canedy, *America’s Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 63.

Still, Dickstein took on the role of ‘mouthpiece’ of the commission with a fervent zeal. He announce to reporters and to the public alike that his mission was to crush the Nazi movement in America. His outright disgust for members of the Friends of New Germany was readily apparent during the hearings. His tactics were described by many, including former supporters, as intimidation tactics. Despite the opinions of those who found no use for Dickstein’s methods, few could quibble with the results produced by those methods. He was successful in uncovering evidence that Nazi Germany was giving extensive ideological and financial support to Nazi movements in the United States.⁴⁶

One question answered by the committee revolved around the makeup of the Friends of New Germany membership. Just who were these people? Dickstein tried to make the case that the American Nazi Party, with an approximate membership of between five and six thousand in the 1934-1935 period, was made up of losers, outcasts, criminals, and those who could fit in no where else. Though this may have been partly true, the committee found that many of the members were “German nationals who were members of the NSDAP, German nationals who were not members of the NSDAP, naturalized Germans, and native-born Americans of German extraction.”⁴⁷ It was the last group upon which the later German American Bund concentrated its recruiting efforts.

After a year of hearings, the McCormack-Dickstein Commission released its findings to the public in February 1935. Many Americans already knew what to expect due to the vociferous denunciations of Dickstein throughout 1934. The committee

⁴⁶ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 174.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

found that there was indeed documented evidence of German subversion that contributed to the strengthening of Nazi organizations in the United States. Although the findings were indisputable, there was no public outcry, nor was there any further action on the part of Congress to dismantle the organization. One reason seems to be that the determination was a *fait accompli*, thanks to the outspoken Congressman Dickstein. Any furor that might have arisen had dissipated throughout the year-long investigation. Second, and perhaps more importantly, once the committee's findings were made known, the German government quickly issued a disclaimer of any knowledge regarding the actions or activities of its nationals.

German Party officials felt that the NSDAP had to disassociate itself from the German American Nazi parties. Perhaps, paradoxically, they believed that a genuine Nazi movement in America might be the way to achieve their goals in that country.⁴⁸ After all, in the early Nazi era, the possibility of friendship and close ties with the United States still existed, and Hitler did not want to destroy such an opportunity through the agitation generated by pseudo-Nazi parties.

Finally, in November 1935, the NSDAP declared that all German nationals, and even those who had declared that they were seeking American citizenship, were forbidden to join or to remain as members of the Friends of New Germany. Refusal to do so would result in the loss of German citizenship. With Hitler's edict, the NSDAP hoped that FONG would die a fast death.

It did not die, but in fact learned to change with the times. In December 1935, Gissibl made the decision to return to Germany. His handpicked successor was a

⁴⁸ Ibid., 174.

naturalized American citizen, an attribute that Hitler had requested for the next leader of the American Nazi Party. Little did Hitler, Gissibl, Dickstein or any of the current or former members of the Friends of New Germany suspect that the next three years would be years of expansion and reinvigoration for the soon to be renamed FONG. The years 1936 to 1939 would be the heyday of American Nazi Party. It would be dominated by the self-proclaimed “American Fuehrer,” Fritz Kuhn.

As this thesis will show, Kuhn’s tenure as Bundesfuehrer of the German American Bund contributed to the movement’s success. The history of successful political and/or social movements seems to confirm the notion that, more often than not, the leader makes the movement, rather than the movement making the leader. This was certainly true with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Mussolini and the Fascists, and Hitler and the National Socialists. One can only wonder if these movements would have grown and succeeded without the skills these men and others brought to their respective movements. It is the contention of this thesis that but for the efforts and leadership skills of Fritz Kuhn, the American Nazi Party would have remained stagnant, and perhaps would have withered away under the onslaught of congressional investigations and the public outcry.

Fritz Kuhn was born in Munich on May 15, 1896. He enlisted in the Bavarian infantry unit after hostilities were declared in 1914, serving in France as a machine gunner and earning the Iron Cross defending the Fatherland.⁴⁹ Following the end of the war, Kuhn returned to his hometown, unemployed and with no prospects for his future, biographical characteristics which he shared with the actual founder of National

⁴⁹ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 227.

Socialism.

Kuhn joined a Freikorps company, a paramilitary organization that fought against the Weimar Republic's enemies both within and outside the country. As a member of the Freikorps, Kuhn fought against the Communists and the Socialists in his native city.⁵⁰ His need for dominance and control, so clearly typified during his years of leadership of the Bund, found an outlet when he joined the NSDAP in 1921. Many who joined the Nazi Party had nothing but their party membership to rely on. Kuhn, on the other hand, chose to continue his education and enrolled at the University of Munich, where he received a degree in chemical engineering in 1922.⁵¹

In 1923, Kuhn had had enough of the turmoil of post-World War One Germany. He made the decision to emigrate to Mexico. Once he made the decision to enter the United States a year later, Kuhn found it easier to surmount immigration restrictions and gain entry into the United States from Mexico than had he emigrated directly from Germany. Kuhn, whose ability to spin stories was well known, claimed he left Germany after being arrested for his involvement in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. According to Diamond, there is no evidence to support a statement Kuhn made in the late thirties that he was at Hitler's side during the Beer Hall Putsch and was forced to emigrate.⁵² Interestingly, there were reports at the time that Kuhn had actually left Germany because he was guilty of petty theft at his employer's warehouse. His boss, a Jew named Reinhold Spitz, who was a friend of the Kuhn family, fired him but refused to press charges. Instead, he set up a collection to raise funds to buy Kuhn's ticket to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 78.

⁵² Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 228.

Mexico.⁵³ In light of Kuhn's later actions vis-à-vis embezzlement of Bund funds, this story is not beyond the realm of possibility.

At the age of thirty-one, Kuhn entered the United States through Laredo, Texas. He moved to Detroit after a brief stay in New York. In large part because of his poor command of spoken and written English, Kuhn moved exclusively in German-background circles.⁵⁴ Kuhn later claimed that he worked for Ford until 1935, although the company has no record of his employment.⁵⁵ Documents do indicate that Kuhn did in fact live in Detroit and that he became a naturalized citizen on December 3, 1934. Within a year, he would become the supreme leader of the newly reorganized American Nazi Party, now named the German American Bund.

Kuhn, with the sense of the militarism that had pervaded his life since the war, had been a member of the so-called "Steel Helmets Association."⁵⁶ Known in German as Der Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten (The Steel Helmet, Association of Frontline Soldiers), the organization was founded in 1918 as a "mutual aid society for World War One veterans and as a political combat group."⁵⁷ His goal, having arrived on American shores, appeared to be to create a militaristic movement based upon Der Stahlhelm, which was eventually absorbed by the Sturmabteilung (S.A.). The S.A., or Brown Shirts, was Hitler's first Nazi paramilitary organization.

⁵³ Donald Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America: The Rise in Group Prejudice During the Decade 1930-1940* (Washington: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941), 25.

⁵⁴ Gene Smith, "Bundesfuehrer Kuhn," *American Heritage Magazine.com* 46, no. 5 (1995), http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1995/5/1995_5_102.shtml (accessed May 2, 2008).

⁵⁵ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 227.

⁵⁶ U.S. Congress, House, 76th Congress, 1st Session, *Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the U.S., Hearings*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 3707.

⁵⁷ Flags of the World.com, <http://flagspot.net/flags/de%7Dstahl.html> (accessed May 4, 2008).

All indications are that Kuhn was, both socially and politically, was skilled in marketing. More often than not, the focus of his efforts was on the marketing of Fritz Kuhn. Throughout his life, Kuhn was not only a political and military organizer, but was known as a “ladies’ man” as well. Unlike his hero, Der Fuehrer, he had a taste for wine, women and song. Although he had been married in 1923 to Elsa Walthers and had two children with her, he was often seen out in public with elegant women on his arm. Three years after his takeover of the Bund, his propensity for the high life would ultimately be the cause of his, and ultimately the Bund’s, destruction.

Even though he gained a great amount of weight over the years, Kuhn had always been a large man who stood 5’ 11”, and his weight fluctuated at around 200 pounds. Former Bund members described him as egotistical, forceful and quite decisive in character, extremely intelligent, and magnetic.⁵⁸ They also described Kuhn as an “extremely professional, dedicated, and slightly distant man who inspired great admiration and trust. . . who, along with his histrionics and demagoguery, had a firm conviction of American strength and a total allegiance to the United States.”⁵⁹ It was this conviction that led Kuhn to decree that only American citizens of German extraction could hold leadership positions in the German American Bund, unlike Gissibl’s earlier policy that permitted non-American citizens to hold leadership positions in The Friends of New Germany.

Among the future Bundesfuehrer’s aptitudes was his business acumen. Indeed, rather than strictly ideological, the Bund appeared to become a moneymaking enterprise

⁵⁸ Appendix, Part IV of U.S. Congress, House, Special Committee Hearings on Un-American Activities, 77th Congress, 1st Session, 1941, 1490.

⁵⁹ Canedy, *America’s Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 81.

during the years Kuhn was in control. Between 1936 and 1938, Kuhn created, reorganized, or incorporated six independent corporations, including the German American Business League, the American Volksbund Development Corporation, the American Volksbund Publishing Company, the Prospective Citizens' League, the German American Settlement League, and the German American Bund Auxiliary.⁶⁰ He served as either president or as a member of the board of directors with all of these organizations. Through all these business activities he was able to change the remnants of the Friends of New Germany into an organization no longer dependent upon the financial goodwill of Nazi Germany. This was in complete contrast to Gissibl and Spanknoebel, whose ability to raise the funds necessary to keep their respective organizations in the black was sorely lacking. In fact, no available primary documentation indicates that either man made any real effort to truly market the Teutonia Association or the Friends of New Germany. Relying on Nazi Germany's goodwill ultimately undermined these organizations. Under Kuhn, the Bund became a money-making machine that could survive through its own efforts.

Another advantage that Kuhn enjoyed over his predecessors is that compared to them, he had excellent credentials. His "resume" showed that he had been an early member of the National Socialist Party in the Fatherland, that he served in a Free Corps and the Steel Helmet Association and that he was university-educated.

From 1934 on, Kuhn rose steadily within the ranks. Over the next two years, he became a leader, or Gauleiter, of the Midwestern Department, having gotten into the good graces of Fritz Gissibl. He had been brought to Gissibl's attention not only

⁶⁰ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 222.

through his impressive background, but my managing to be in the right place at the right time after intra-party fighting (in what has come to be called in German American Bund lore, the “Haegele-Schnuch Conflict”), had ended.

On July 28, 1935, the *New York Times* published an article in which Congressman Dickstein listed forty-six Nazi agitators. Prominent at the top of the list was Fritz Gissibl, who was described in the *New York Times* as “the power behind the throne in Nazi intrigue in this country and one of the leaders of the Friends of New Germany.”⁶¹ Gissibl had made a number of missteps in the intervening months since taking back power, and it had captured the attention of the government, the press, and German Americans not affiliated with the Friends of New Germany.

The Friends of New Germany’s declarations in favor of Nazi Germany became more effusive, while their threats against Jews and Communists became more threatening. Members of the United German Societies became more vocal in their opposition to the Friends of New Germany. In the opinion of the United German Societies, the “German elements in this country are now preponderantly in favor of the New Germany anyway; consequently, the violent declarations of the Friends, especially their recently renewed cries of ‘battle against Jews and Communists,’ serve no purpose except to prejudice the German reputation in America.”⁶² The Friends were also attacked by the “Friends of Democracy,” a German-American led organization whose sole purpose was to combat the Nazi philosophy in America.

A national convention of the Friends that September also contributed to the furor that was about to come to a head. Gissibl and the other leaders used the gathering to

⁶¹ *The New York Times*, July 28, 1935.

⁶² *The New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1935.

clarify the purpose of the Friends of New Germany, lest there be any misunderstanding. The *raison d'etre* of the Friends was and would continue, according to Gissibl, to be “the uniting of the German American population in the complete Nazi philosophy for the good of this country.”⁶³ Newspapers, radio stations, government officials and German Americans came out against the Friends in force. Perhaps more importantly, Adolf Hitler had enough of what he had always considered a failed Nazi “knock-off.”

Until 1935, Hitler had supported the idea of a Nazi-style organization that would, in effect, act as a marketing tool for the Third Reich. As discussed earlier, the early years of the Third Reich, specifically 1933 to 1935, were years of possibility in terms of friendship with the United States. Despite the investigations, a Jewish boycott of German goods (in response to the German boycott of Jewish goods in 1933), and a general rowdiness by members of the Friends, Hitler still had hope that through the efforts of FONG, Nazi Germany would be seen in a positive light. It became apparent to Hitler by the end of 1935 that the Friends of New Germany was undermining, not contributing to, his efforts to market the new Germany to Americans. Even Karl Neumann, who headed Germany’s Department of Film, wrote that, “if our Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, ever saw the mess in New York, he would cry.”⁶⁴

During this period of upheaval, Fritz Kuhn had been keeping a low, but effective, profile. He had chosen correctly in the fight for leadership of the Friends, maintaining his loyalty to Gissibl and working to keep potential traitors in the fold. It

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Smith, “Bundesfuehrer Kuhn”, *American Heritage Magazine.com*, http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1995/5/1995_5_102.shtml (accessed May 2, 2008).

was this all-important period of the Friend's existence, between September and December 1935 that Kuhn planted the seeds that would eventually result in his appointment as Bundesleiter. He presented himself as a man who would always rise above the petty jealousies, and called on the in-fighting to stop for the good of the movement. Dr. Leland Bell notes that Kuhn was instrumental in the drafting of a new constitution, which reaffirmed the 'leadership principle' - the complete submission of members to the decisions of the Bundesleiter.⁶⁵

In October 1935, Hitler ordered that all German nationals relinquish their membership in the Friends. He was aware of the bad press it was engendering in the United States and had become disenchanted with the organization. As an inducement to force the membership to disband, those who refused would lose their German citizenship. As approximately sixty percent of the Friends' membership were German nationals, this move was meant to be an effective threat to the life of the organization.⁶⁶

Having finally come to the realization that the fellowship he had worked so hard to maintain and strengthen was about to be dissolved, Gissibl made plans to return to Germany. He left the United States in December 1935, but he, along with fellow Friends of New Germany leader Sepp Schuster, would continue to have influence from afar. Both would go on to found the *Kameradschaft USA* in Germany in October 1938. The stated aim of *Kameradschaft USA*, which began as a social club, was to "aid and co-ordinate the return of foreign Germans to the Reich."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Leland Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Port Washington, NY: Kenikat Press, 1973), 123.

⁶⁶ Donald McKale, *The Swastika Outside Germany* (Ohio: Kent University Press, 1977), 91.

⁶⁷ Arthur L. Smith, Jr., "The Kameradschaft USA," *The Journal of Modern History* 34, no. 4 (Dec., 1962), 400.

After Hitler's October announcement, Gissibl returned to Germany to try and seek a reversal of the decision. It was all for naught, and on Christmas Day 1935, Rudolf Hess reaffirmed the Fuehrer's decision in a written response. The letter was released to the Associated Press and published in the *New York Times*.⁶⁸

Not willing to see nearly twelve years of his labors vanish, Gissibl asked for and received permission from the German government to appoint a new leader to a reformed pan-German (i.e. Nazi) organization. Gissibl's choice for leader of this yet to be formed group was his stalwart and faithful Gauleiter of the Midwest Department, Fritz Kuhn. Hitler approved the recommendation that December. Within three months, Fritz Kuhn would restructure the Friends of New Germany with the remaining members, most of whom were American citizens (although the edict to exclude German nationals was blatantly disregarded). Over the next three years, the self-proclaimed "American Fuehrer" would put his talents for marketing and propaganda, his boisterous personality, and his firm belief in the greatness of his cause, to good use. Adolf Hitler's plan was to dismember and neutralize the embarrassment to his government known as the Friends of New Germany. Ironically, in approving Fritz Kuhn to head the new "Americanized" organization, he inadvertently set in motion the creation of a movement that brought the Nazi threat into American homes in a way never achieved by Kuhn's predecessors. For the next three years, through the multiple talents of the egocentric Kuhn, the German American Bund would capture the attention of an ever more nervous and unsettled American public.

⁶⁸ *The New York Times*, December 25, 1935.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bund Triumphant

The German American Bund thrived and prospered under Kuhn's leadership, managing to survive against extensive anti-Nazi sentiment for more than three years. The "American Fuehrer" (as he came to be known in the press) successfully "Americanized" the organization, led several mass rallies, courted unaffiliated German Americans, created associated businesses to put the organization on firm financial footing, and used the press, radio and newspapers in a particularly effective way utilizing the new science of public relations and mass communication. In an effort to promote Nazi values and transmit them to the next generation, he established beginning in 1936 what was perhaps the most visible of the Bund's creations – a series of summer camps which served as indoctrination centers for children, the most notorious being Camp Siegfried in upstate New York and Camp Nordland in New Jersey.

Kuhn also established alliances with other right-wing, anti-Semitic leaders such as the "radio priest" Father Charles Coughlin; Coughlin sent contributions to the Bund, and members of the both the Bund and Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice Movement marched together in rallies and interacted on a regular basis. In the process Kuhn attracted the attention of Hollywood, which began to make a series of anti-Nazi films, and the Congressional Dies Commission, which unsuccessfully sought to extirpate both Fritz Kuhn and his organization. (Eventually, the Dies Commission

ceased pursuing right-wing groups and instead turned its attention toward alleged Communist infiltration in the US). One of the heights of Kuhn's career came with his summer 1936 trip to Nazi Germany in the course of the Olympics, where he and several other Bund members were introduced to Adolf Hitler. Although Hitler would later repudiate the meeting with Kuhn as nothing more than a brief introduction which meant nothing (in fact, it was just one of hundreds of introductions given to Hitler during the Olympics), Kuhn would use this meeting to persuade his followers that he deserved supreme loyalty because he was an intimate of Hitler's.

Once Gissibl and the other leaders of the now-defunct Friends of New Germany had left the United States for Germany, Kuhn got down to business. Although Gissibl had christened him as the leader of the new movement, Kuhn felt it was necessary for his role as Bundesleiter to be validated through a vote of the remaining membership. In this, he saw himself rising and achieving power as Hitler had done; through the power of the ballot, not the bullet.

Between December 1935 and March 1936, Kuhn made an effort to bring all the previous inter and intra-party fighting to an end. Like his hero, Adolf Hitler, he set for himself two immediate objectives; to create a unified organization and to ensure that all the members of the yet to be named group swore personal loyalty to him. There is no indication in the recorded or oral history of German American organizations between 1924 and 1936 that members were required to take personal loyalty oaths to the leader of the movement rather than to the movement itself. This innovation by Kuhn resulted in a rallying effect around the new Bundesleiter. Kuhn required that each member of the O.D. take an oath of fidelity to him, and increased the size of the group to ten

percent of the Friends' total membership. He gathered a group of close collaborators who would be loyal to him and to whom he could delegate responsibility.⁶⁹ Thus he used the power of his own charisma to assert his leadership.

Although many of the members of Kuhn's new organization were former members of the Friends, Kuhn made it clear during his testimony to the House committee in 1938 that the German American Bund was not just the successor organization to the Friends of New Germany. In his response to an inquiry about the relationship between the Friends and the Bund, Kuhn responded that "the Friends of New Germany was dissolved and a new organization was formed and created, absolutely new, because in the German American Bund there are only American citizens."⁷⁰

When Kuhn was confident that he had reached the two objectives he had set out to accomplish during the upheaval of late 1935 and early 1936, he called for a gathering of all loyal German Americans. This conclave convened in Buffalo, New York in March 1936. Other than the Madison Square Garden Rally of 1939, this earlier convention represented a high point and a moment of glory for the vainglorious Kuhn. All the major and the minor Nazi groups attended the conference in what could be considered the anointing of Fritz Kuhn. As soon as he was elected Bundesleiter, he declared the Friends of New Germany defunct and asked delegates to adopt a new name: Amerikadeutscher Volksbund (German American Bund). The new name

⁶⁹ Grover, *Nazis in Newark*, 176.

⁷⁰ Hearings, Vol. 2: 3709.

reflected Kuhn's desire to Americanize the group to promote friendship between Germany and America.⁷¹

None of Kuhn's predecessors had shown the foresight exhibited by the new Bundesleiter that was necessary to unite all of the disparate factions. Under the new regime, all members were German, all were American, and all had a common enemy. Unlike the past, the enemy was not each other, but as delineated in the first official Bund statement, Bund members were to "combat the Moscow-directed madness of the Red world menace and its Jewish bacillus-carriers."⁷²

Back in Germany, Hitler was kept abreast of developments with the new organization. He had never held much interest in the goings-on of the Nazi-inspired "social clubs," and the Friends of New Germany had caused him much aggravation during its short existence. As discussed earlier, although not adverse in earlier days to the existence of these organizations in the United States and other parts of the world, Hitler immediately turned against the Friends once he realized that it was generating negative publicity against the Third Reich.

However distasteful it may appear in contemporary times to have had an active Nazi organization in the United States, it must be remembered that throughout the early and mid-1930s, Hitler's true stripes were yet to be determined. Indeed, until the advent of Kuhn and the German-American Bund, the pre-existing Nazi cabal in America was quite ineffectual in getting its message across to the American public. Most Americans during this period of time were more concerned with putting food on their table and finding work than with worrying about the influence of Nazis in the United States.

⁷¹ Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 17.

⁷² *The New York Times*, April 1, 1936.

Even the McCormack-Dickstein investigation of 1934 had no real or lasting impact on government policy or on the American psyche. Although members of the committee concluded that, “it develops that all kinds of efforts and influence, short of violence and force, were used to obtain [Nazism’s] desired objective to consolidate persons of German birth or descent, if possible, into one group, subject to dictation from abroad,”⁷³ no substantive actions were taken against the groups.

Despite the nuisance that the Friends had become to Hitler, this new incarnation, in the form of the German-American Bund, seems to have garnered his interest. Kuhn had been highly recommended to him by Gissibl, and the prospect of real movement in the “positive marketing” of Nazi Germany now seemed a realistic possibility. Hitler told Party member and former president of the Danzig Senate Hermann Rauschning that the Bund had its uses. Hitler stated that two organizations were needed in foreign countries, one loyal and one revolutionary.⁷⁴ Kuhn’s plan of action, both tactical and strategic, was to combine the loyal with the revolutionary. The concept of combining patriotism and loyalty for his adopted country with patriotism, loyalty, and reverence for his birth country and its government was, to say the least, a novel approach. His “Americanization” of the movement was an attempt to dispel any talk of an NSDAP-controlled association that was getting its directives straight from Hitler.

Unlike Spanknoebel and Gissibl, who may have led their organizations but were never identified as symbols of those organizations, Kuhn attempted to meld the Bund

⁷³ U.S. Congress, House, 74th Congress, 1st Session, *Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the U.S., Investigation of Nazi and Other Propaganda*, Vol. 44 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934)

⁷⁴ Joachim Remak, “Friends of New Germany: The Bund and German-American Relations”, *The Journal of Modern History* 29, no. 1 (Mar., 1957), 38.

and himself into one indivisible entity. In creating this “cult of personality,” Kuhn was further able to create a following loyal not only to the movement, but to himself as well. To do service to the Bundesleiter was to do service to the Bund. And just in case there were those who refused to show the proper deference to Kuhn, he could rely on his O.D. bodyguard and security service to enforce his edicts.

Interestingly, it appears that after the debacles of the Haegele-Schnuch conflict, the House investigation, and the call to dismantle the Friends of New Germany, the remaining members were psychologically ready to acquiesce to the hegemony of one dominant leader. It seems that opportune timing also played a role in Kuhn’s success over the next three years.

When the new Bundesleiter officially acceded to power on March 29, 1936, it was a *fait accompli*. He inherited the leadership of an organization with an elaborate national structure, which included fifty-five separate groupings in seven regions of the United States.⁷⁵ Not willing to experience a repeat of the earlier intra-party fighting of the Gissibl years, Kuhn surrounded himself with loyal friends who would immediately quell any disturbance within the ranks. Unlike his predecessors, he almost never shared information or private thoughts with anyone outside his circle of trust. To Kuhn, friendship, loyalty, and dedication to the Bund were all intertwined. To be disloyal to Kuhn was to be disloyal to the Bund, and that association kept the membership in its place.

Among the associates that the new Bundesleiter chose to call “friends,” and who

⁷⁵ “Organization of the German American Bund, Division of the United States into Principal Jurisdictions”, *Hearings*, Part IV, Appendix, 1549.

therefore, became part of the new leadership, were Gerhard Wilhelm Kunze, a former chauffeur-mechanic from Camden, New Jersey; Hans Zimmerman, a German-born waiter and former member of Roehm's SA; Richard Schmidt, who had served as an engineer in the German navy and held the Iron Cross; Anton Fuchs, who would later serve in Rommel's Africakorps; Carl-Heinz Eymann, who returned to Germany in 1938 and was killed on the Russian front in August 1942, and Carl Nicolay, who served as the poet laureate of the Bund.⁷⁶

With his organization in place, Kuhn set out to establish "propaganda schools" for the officers of each of the units. Unlike Gissibl and Spanknoebel, the Bundesleiter placed a premium on propaganda and saw it as an essential tool in reaching his intended audience, the American public. Witnessing Dr. Goebbels' efforts in Germany, Kuhn attempted to duplicate the process. According to Karl Ernst Weiler, unit leader of the Eastern District, in his testimony before the FBI in his de-naturalization proceeding, "I attended one of the propaganda schools. I received a notice from headquarters that attendance at this school was compulsory. We met at a restaurant at New Hyde Park, Long Island, one meeting a week, for eight weeks. . . the purpose of the school was to enable the officers to have a training that would enable them to carry out the activities of the Bund."⁷⁷

In concert with the training classes came a change in the style and color of the O.D. uniform. Kuhn wanted a distinctive style that would favor the NSDAP uniform, but would not be seen as identical. Throughout his tenure, Kuhn walked a fine line between overt Nazi symbolism and the Americanization of those symbols in an attempt

⁷⁶ *Hearings*, Vol. 2: 3727.

⁷⁷ U.S. F.B.I., *Testimony of Karl Ernst Weiler*, Karl Ernst Weiler File.

to make it more palatable to the American public. During his denaturalization case, Ernst Mueller, the head of the German American Settlement League (a subsidiary of the German American Bund which purchased land on behalf of the Bund) discussed the look of the new uniform during his testimony in front of John C. Hilly, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the New York City District: “The white shirt was changed to a gray shirt, and the pants were changed to dark blue pants. The swastika came out of a rising sun.”⁷⁸

There were those who disagreed with the changes. Henry Hauck, a Bundist who ran the inn and the restaurant at Camp Siegfried in Yaphank, Long Island, stated his opposition to the uniforms. In his brief to the Department of Justice during the civil court case against him for his involvement in both the Bund and the Nazi-themed Camp Siegfried for children, Hauck stated that he had introduced a resolution opposing the wearing of uniforms as “tending to put the members in a bad light in American eyes.”⁷⁹ When the resolution was defeated by majority vote, he was very disappointed and discussed his disappointment with Ernst Mueller, who made the suggestion that Hauck resign from the Bund and take over the restaurant and inn at Camp Siegfried, freeing himself from Bund duties and responsibilities.⁸⁰

Kuhn had always been a clear and concise spokesman on behalf of the Friends of New Germany, and his selection as Bundesleiter of the German-American Bund gave him ample opportunity to use those same abilities to an even greater degree. Kuhn had charisma and was a compelling speaker, unlike the leaders of the earlier movements,

⁷⁸ *People of New York v. Mueller et al.* 255 N.Y. (1941).

⁷⁹ *U.S. v. Hauck et al.*, 155 F. (2d) 20, (1946).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

who were lacked the requisite color and excitement needed to inspire German-Americans to join their respective groups.

Among his first duties, Kuhn felt it necessary to put forth his views in a pamphlet entitled “*Purpose and Aims of the German American Bund (Amerikadeutscher Volksbund), An Organization of Patriotic Americans of German Stock.*” Unlike Spanknoebel and Gissibl, who never published their own “plan of action,” Kuhn set out his agenda, not unlike *Mein Kampf*. Of course, the comparison can be taken to extremes, but it must be remembered that Kuhn attempted to mimic Hitler at every opportunity.

Congressman Dickstein, would, in 1938, include excerpts of the Bund’s “constitution” in the pages of the *Congressional Record* ahead of the soon to be formed Dies Committee. Having been greatly disappointed in the outcome of the 1934 effort, Dickstein was anxious to use Kuhn’s words against him.

Made part of the *Congressional Record*, the aims and purposes of the Bund begin by evincing the Bund’s devotion and loyalty to the United States. Members pledge “to uphold and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States; to respect and honor the flag and institutions of the United States and to cultivate their lofty ideals; to be of real value and a desirable and respected class of law-abiding citizens of the United States of America.”⁸¹

The effort to “Americanize” the movement was crucial. Available documentation from the days of Teutonia, and the Friends of New Germany do not indicate that the leaders of those organizations made any great effort to show their love

⁸¹ U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, March 2, 1938, 2726.

and support of the United States. On the contrary, having had (for the most part) German nationals as members, the emphasis was on loyalty to the German homeland. It is only with the advent of Fritz Kuhn's tenure that the marketing of the Bund as an "American institution" takes place.

More than just a governing charter, when read in its entirety, the Bund's constitution is filled with terms of arrogance and superiority; phrases such as "Germanic Race" and "Germanic Blood" mingle with sentiments that one could hardly interpret as emanating from loyal Americans. The Bund pledges its best efforts to "defend with all lawful means at our disposal the good name and honor of our mother-country Germany against all base defamation, willful and poisonous lies and purposeful malice emanating from any ill-wishing, jealous, avaricious and ignorant source whatsoever, be it race, people, tribe, clan, nation, association or individual."⁸²

The manifesto goes on to attack all media for what the Bund sees as distortions and propaganda against the movement, specifically, "print, script and mouth, openly and covertly, through books, magazines, newspapers, leaflets, and just cowardly rumors."⁸³

The dichotomy created by so disparate a set of ideas could only be trouble for Kuhn. On the one hand, the Bundesleiter was pledging complete loyalty to his adopted country; conversely, the document appeared to be a dictum in favor of Nazi Germany. This schizophrenic approach was the technique that Kuhn utilized in order to try and appear in the guise of a loyal American; all the while, the Bund continued to promote

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

Nazi policies. Throughout early and mid-1936, Kuhn continued to consolidate his power. His marketing of the Bund began in earnest with a series of open rallies and numerous articles published by the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*. He also reinstated the title of “Bundesfuehrer,” which had been used by Spanknoebel prior to Hitler’s accession to power in January 1933. Unlike the more generalized term “Bundesleiter,” organizational leader, “Bundesfuehrer” contained overtones of a military, or paramilitary leader. Kuhn viewed himself as a military leader in the style of Hitler. Additionally, the media had begun to refer to the pompous Kuhn as the “American Fuehrer” following the numerous parades and rallies that were becoming commonplace in the streets of New York City.

Not all German Americans subscribed to Kuhn’s vision of a Hitler-inspired, military-style, racially motivated movement. In fact, there were numerous American citizens of German background or heritage that rejected out of hand offers to join the Bund. Alternatively, many of those who accepted the movement and its philosophy of hate and racial superiority at face value found a home. Bund members, who perhaps in their mundane, day to day lives, felt little worth and little appreciated by society at large, now found a niche in which to channel those feelings of hate and superiority.

In *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, author Chris Hedges gives a descriptive and telling overview of the mindset of those who would join such movements. Although the book is subtitled *The Christian Right and the War on America*, the author makes the case that all adherents of totalitarian movements share similar quirks and aberrations in their world-view. He writes that the use of elaborate spectacle to channel and shape the passions of mass followers is a

staple of totalitarian movements. According to Hedges, it gives its adherents the raw material for their interior lives, for love and hate, joy and sorrow, excitement and belonging. It creates comradeship and solidarity, possible only as long as those within the movement do not defy the collective emotions of the crowd and willingly devote themselves to the communal objective.⁸⁴ Along with group acceptance, such an inclusion offers validation to each individual's existence, giving meaning and purpose to life, turning a mundane existence into an epic battle against forces of darkness. Acceptance by a group also gives adherents a permissiveness, a rhetorical license to engage in acts of violence that are normally taboo in a democratic society. It becomes permissible to hate. The crowds are wrapped in the seductive language of violence, which soon enough leads to real acts of violence.⁸⁵ Fritz Kuhn fed the needs of the group through his use of the language of violence. He wasn't only content to influence the current generation of Bund members, but desired to imbue their children with his ideological point of view.

Kuhn, unlike his two predecessors, envisioned a movement that would incorporate and indoctrinate future generations of Bundists. In this vein, in the summer of 1936, the German American Bund opened up its first of several summer camps for children, "Camp Siegfried." Located in the attractive countryside of Yaphank, Long Island sixty miles east of New York City, Camp Siegfried would be, in Kuhn's mind, a children's paradise. Here, young Bundists would learn the creed and ideology of the German-American Bund, all the while experiencing the excitement of the outdoors and

⁸⁴ Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 30-31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

of other camp activities that one would find in a non-Bundist summer camp.

Ernst Mueller, the head of the German American Settlement League (a subsidiary of the Bund that actually purchased the 45 acres of land for use as a summer camp and weekend getaway), marketed the new camp in a pamphlet that went out all over the country. Free of political, military, or racist overtones, the new camp was described as a “quiet retreat”⁸⁶: “When the weekend approaches, we are just longing to leave the pavements, the crowded thoroughfares and the noise of the city. Visit Camp Siegfried! Camp Siegfried is located along the picturesque banks of the Mill River, surrounded by shady woodlands, on hilly ground. . . it will remind you of those beautiful summer excursion resorts in the old homeland.”⁸⁷ Mueller made certain that prospective visitors would know what to expect. He drew interest by stating that members would “meet people that think as you do. . . cheerful people, honest and are no military barracks, field pieces, and other things mentioned in the newspapers.”⁸⁸

According to its constitution and by-laws, the purpose of the German American Settlement League was to “introduce, cultivate, and propagate in every direction true Germanic culture and to cultivate the German language, customs and ideals.”⁸⁹ Yet, in the schizophrenic fashion that Kuhn had made his hallmark, Kuhn and Mueller were careful to incorporate language that would bolster the perception that they and their membership were comprised of loyal Americans: “To enlighten [its members] in the true spirit of their civic obligations and the cardinal principles of American citizenship,

⁸⁶ *New York v. Mueller et al.*, Transcript, Defendant’s Exhibit E, (1938).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Constitution and By-Laws of the German-American Settlement League, Inc.*, (State of New York 1936).

and to promote and inculcate in its youth a spirit of loyalty, love for the country, respect for the flag of the United States, and to train and instruct them in the theory and practice of good citizenship.”⁹⁰

However strongly the German American Settlement League portrayed its American values, the fact remains that Camp Siegfried, Camp Nordland (New Jersey), Camp Hindenburg (Wisconsin), and the several other youth camps throughout the United States were created to indoctrinate the youth in National Socialist ideology, which included a love of Hitler and Germany and a hatred of Jews and Communists. Congressman Dickstein recognized the paradox and said as much during congressional hearings in 1937: “The Camp Nordland pamphlet refers to a list of speakers, including the ‘Honorable State Senator William A. Dolan’. His being there is undoubtedly to dress up the occasion with American patriotism, showing that American public officials support the Nazi movement in the United States, and support the erection of camps in this country which are established for the purpose of conducting Hitler propaganda in the United States.”⁹¹

On September 1 and September 3, 1937, the Federal Bureau of Investigation interviewed Fritz Kuhn to find out the answer. The government had begun its investigation into what it entitled “Nazi Camps in the United States” in 1936, and documents of Kuhn’s interviews were made available through the Freedom of Information Act. These documents were supplied to me along with hundreds of others in 2003 by Marvin Miller, who utilized many of them in his book, *Wunderlich’s Salute*.

Kuhn was interviewed again in late November 1937. He stated that the cost of

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, July 26, 1937.

building and running Camp Siegfried through 1936 was \$12,000. The funds were collected through donations from Bund members. According to the F.B.I. report, “this is not in the form of a mortgage. The members simply put in five or ten dollars and are given a note for the money, payable within sixty days after demand.”⁹² Kuhn explained that after the debt to individual members had been paid off, the deeds were then placed in the names of the German American Settlement League (in the case of Camp Siegfried) and the German American Auxiliary Bund (in the case of Camp Nordland). Kuhn then went on to describe other properties owned or leased by the Bund, including: Camp Von Steuben (Connecticut), Camp Deutschort (Pennsylvania), Deutsche Zentrale Farm (Ohio), and several undeveloped properties in California, Indiana, and Illinois.⁹³

The FBI report further relates that the Bund bought most of its camp equipment from J.J. Enright of New York City. All payments were made in cash; never by check. Interestingly, Enright requested that “his business transactions with the German Camps be treated as confidential, declaring that his principal business is Jewish trade which he will lose if it became generally known that he had been selling to the Nazis.”⁹⁴

The German Youth Society, to which all members attending the several camps belonged, listed a number of requirements needed in order to retain membership in the society. The list certainly requires one to suspend any belief that the camps were geared towards creating loyal and upstanding Americans. It confirms the notion of men like Dickstein that the camps were training grounds for young Nazis loyal to Germany. Among the standards listed: “The official language of the Society is German; the

⁹² U.S. FBI, *Nazi Camps in the United States of America*, September 10, 1937, 57-58.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

German Youth should be your conception synonymous with everything beautiful and worthy of attainment; love your Fatherland and subordinate yourself to the good cause of German Youth; visualize in your comrade only the likeminded and equal German clansman; let the old German ideals of truth and loyalty become realities; and espouse the German way and the German custom.”⁹⁵

Kuhn oversaw not only the financial aspects of the camps but also all other facets of camp life. He was an advisor on what was and was not permissible activities that could be held at the several camps. Among those activities permitted were marching and drilling, despite the fact that earlier advertising for the camps had disavowed such undertakings. According to historian Howard Guttman, the Bund members loved the outdoors and nature, which provided not only privacy, but the space in which to hold their marching and drilling.⁹⁶

Kuhn was intimately familiar with the daily regimen at the camps, mainly because all locations followed primarily the same routine. He stated in his testimony that the customary procedures were to “arise at 7 o’clock, breakfast 7:30, clean tents and tent floors with Lysol from 8:00-8:30, one hour for exercises, hikes in the woods, baseball and other games, one hour of instruction in subjects similar to the Boy Scouts, one hour of instruction in American history before dinner, followed by instruction in the German language and the singing of German songs.”⁹⁷ Nowhere does Kuhn mention marching in conjunction with military maneuvers, although he did admit to the fact that

⁹⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁹⁶ Howard M. Guttman, *The German American Bund in New Jersey*, The Crossroads (Camden: New Jersey Historical Society, April 1975), 2.

⁹⁷ U.S. FBI, *Nazi Camps in the United States of America*, 156.

children were required to march in formation to their meals and to the swimming pool. This was particularly necessary, said Kuhn, when large groups of children were being moved from one part of the camp to another part of the camp. Although camps such as Siegfried did not have overwhelmingly large numbers of campers, it was still a sizable group. According to Theodore Dinkelacker, who ran Camp Siegfried's Youth Movement, the average number of children who went through the camp system during the season was approximately 500, with a maximum of 280 at any one time.⁹⁸

In 1937, the German American Bund Auxiliary, Inc. issued a monthly booklet for use at Camp Nordland in New Jersey. In the April 1937 edition of the *Junges Volk* (Young People), the following insights could be found: "The fight against the vermin of the United States will be fought. This is our motto for April 20th [Hitler's birthday] . . . we are the ones who are coming! It has been estimated that there are about twenty-five to thirty million of Germans and Germanic people here. They are not organized, fighting against the filthy insults flung at their race and their Fatherland by a band of elbow-shoving Jews and sneering Marxists."⁹⁹ These comments are certainly a far-cry from the American History lessons described by Kuhn to the FBI.

The reality of the situation was very different from the version Kuhn relayed to The FBI. New Jersey Bund leader August Klapprott, who was invited to speak to neo-Nazi groups as late as 1995, would begin the ceremonies at Camp Nordland with a rousing rendition of "*Deutschland Uber Alles*," followed by the raising of the Nazi flag. Members of the youth groups, both male and female, would give the "Heil Hitler" salute before a large framed photograph of Hitler. During the week, only children went

⁹⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁹⁹ German American Bund Auxiliary, Inc., *Junges Volk* 4, April 1937.

through the rituals; during the weekend, their parents and other adults joined the children for fun in the sun and celebrations in Hitler's honor. Kuhn made it his business to attend camp functions, mostly at Camps Siegfried and Norland. He was adored by the Bundists and became the center of attention at every appearance. His appearances fed the conceited Kuhn's need for attention and adoration. Not only did he see himself as a stand-in for Hitler, but others now saw him in the same light. Unfortunately for Kuhn, word was spreading outside the confines of the Bund about the Nazi children's camps and the indoctrination process that appeared to be taking place. Still, those that attended or visited the camps maintained that the camps were nothing more than restful retreats. Said one visitor to Camp Nordland, "You see. I go to Camp Nordland like to any other lake or place for the weekend . . . we went boating and then we laid down in the sun and sometimes we would just sit and watch the people there."¹⁰⁰

The Fritz Kuhn years had their share of stresses and strains, which Kuhn attributed to the oppression suffered by the movement due to government and media intervention. That said, the Kuhn years were ones of vigorous growth for the German American Bund, both economically and in its membership numbers. It didn't hurt that Kuhn had shifted the limelight from the movement to himself. To many, he was the personification of the movement, and it was he who became the rallying point for the membership. It was also he who had unified the many disparate Nazi parties into one uniform body. Kuhn had vanquished those who might have attempted an overthrow of his rule. He created the camp system, expanded the membership base to numbers never seen in previous incarnations of the German American Bund. The Friends of New

¹⁰⁰ *The New York Times*, September 27, 1937.

Germany had printing presses; it was only under Kuhn that those presses were utilized to the greatest advantage.

The *American Volksbund Publishing Company* (A.V. Publishing) had been reorganized by Kuhn immediately after his accession to power in March 1936. He immediately purchased a controlling interest in the corporate publishing company, with its headquarters in Yorkville, New York. Not willing to have a re-occurrence of the *coup d'etat* that almost toppled Gissibl from office, Kuhn made sure that all of the Bund printing presses throughout the United States were manned by Bund members loyal only to him.

The Bundesfuehrer saw the advantages of propaganda, no doubt taking his lead from the German Minister of Propaganda Goebbels. By 1936, Kuhn had numerous outlets through which he could spread Bund philosophy. Although every administrative section of the Bund had its own newspaper, each was a subsidiary of the New York publishing corporation, which was owned primarily by Kuhn. Among the cities that published newspapers (as well as other types of literature) were Chicago (the *Deutscher Weckruf*), Philadelphia (the *Philadelphia Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*), Los Angeles (the *California Weckruf*) and of course the Bund's foundational newspaper, New York's *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*.¹⁰¹ All editions of the newspaper throughout the country contained the same national news, but were differentiated by the changes in masthead, local news coverage, radio program listings, and news of Bund activities specific to the city of publication. Interestingly, the local printers were not held liable for the content of either the local or the national news. In *U.S. v. Kuhn and*

¹⁰¹*U.S. v. Kuhn and Nineteen Other Cases*, 49 F. Supp. 407 (1943).

Nineteen Other Cases, a civil case filed against Kuhn and other Bund members that sought to denaturalize the defendants, the state lost its case against one of the printers. According to the majority opinion, Fred Hackl, the printer “could not be held responsible for the content of the materials printed and therefore the argument for denaturalization is denied.”¹⁰²

Not willing to place the responsibility for Bund propaganda with just one company, Kuhn made contact with several publishing companies throughout the United States whose owners were sympathetic towards the Bund and its goals, most notably the John Willig Press in Staten Island. Kuhn kept a close relationship with his publishers and printers because he knew that they represented the lifeblood of the movement. Unlike Kuhn’s predecessors, who never placed a premium on developing relationships with outside publishers (producing the great majority of their marketing materials “in-house”), Kuhn used his ties with these publishers in a most advantageous way. One could surmise that it was only after the Haegele-Schnuch debacle (when the printing presses were held hostage) that the importance of continuous propaganda was made clear. In addition to the propaganda, it also provided for the numerous advertisements placed by sympathetic business owners. It was the advertisers’ money, not the memberships’, that raised the needed funds and that kept the Bund’s engine running.

Understanding the importance of “educating” Bund members and the public at large, Kuhn not only had newspapers printed, but imported books from Germany and marketed them under the A.V. Publishing sobriquet. In Sander Diamond’s comprehensive history of the German American Bund, he writes that under Kuhn’s

¹⁰² Ibid.

careful supervision, the A.V. Publishing Corporation marketed its own publications and Nazi literature published in Germany. Works included *Mein Kampf*, *Hitler's Wonderland*, and Hans Christian Andersen's anti-Semitic, *Litvinoff*. The company also published its own material on inexpensive paper, including *Awake and Act!*, *The Snake in the Grass*, and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹⁰³

Members were not only expected to purchase the books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other published items, but were also required to sell Bund products on street corners and at gatherings. Eventually, Kuhn also oversaw the opening of bookstores and mail order operations throughout the country that kept the organization financially solvent: "There were a multitude of interlocking corporations directed by Kuhn, who exerted one-man control over the operation, finances, and activities of a small corporate empire."¹⁰⁴

As the "American Fuehrer," Kuhn attempted to glorify the Bund movement by associating famous Americans with Nazi leaders. The *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* ran numerous articles in its pages purporting to be the true history of America. Horst Wessel, an early leader of the Nazi movement who was killed in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, was acclaimed as the martyr of the movement. In one article, Wessel is compared to Abraham Lincoln. The *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* proclaimed that they "both died to make their country greater."¹⁰⁵

Other historically significant Americans, such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, were regular staples of Bund publications. Kuhn's attempt to

¹⁰³ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 247.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁰⁵ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, "Honest Abe and Horst Wessel", August 12, 1937.

“Americanize” the Bund led to significant changes in its “conversation” with the American public. The masthead for the *Deutscher Weckruf* was transformed into *The Free American*. John Roy Carlson, who went undercover to observe the inner workings of the Bund, writes that “the party line was changed, as a bucket of red, white, and blue paint was applied to make overnight ‘patriots’ of the Nazis. With the realization that the United States would never adopt National Socialism as a replacement for democracy, the Bund became nationalist and isolationist, showing great concern for the welfare of the Republic. They adopted the slogan, ‘America First!’”¹⁰⁶

Three prominent Americans who adhered to the Bund’s brand of anti-Semitism were Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and Fr. Charles Coughlin. Rabid anti-Semites, these men were very vocal in their support. Ford’s columns in the *Dearborn Independent* were collected and published as *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*. The book, which contained selections from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as well as Ford’s ruminations on the Jewish “problem” was a best seller in Nazi Germany; Charles Lindbergh, whose support of the Hitler government and his conviction that Jews were intent on pushing the United States into a war with Germany (through the use of the Jewish-controlled media) certainly qualified him to make the list of leading anti-Semites; and Father Charles Coughlin, whose tirades against the Jews earned him the moniker of “the father of hate radio.”¹⁰⁷ Of the three, Father Coughlin was the one most intimately associated with Fritz Kuhn and the German American Bund. Kuhn, utilizing his supposed connection to Hitler and his numerous innovations,

¹⁰⁶ John Roy Carlson, *Undercover* (New York: Alfred Dutton and Co., 1943), 113-114.

¹⁰⁷ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

including marketing strategy, rallies and the children's camps, was able to draw continued support, both financially and in increasing Bund membership. No small part of that support came from a surprising source, Father Charles Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice.

CHAPTER THREE

Father Coughlin, Adolf Hitler, and the Hollywood Connection

In 1926, Father Charles Coughlin established The Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan. Few clergy based in the United States possessed the influence wielded by Father Coughlin. Warren writes that Coughlin was described as “silver tongued” and “golden voiced” and referred to as both the “mad monk of Royal Oak” and the “Radio Messiah.”¹⁰⁸ His voice was a rich baritone that drew the listener in and wrapped him in the priest’s message. Unfortunately, his message was, more often than not, malevolent in nature.

Over the years, numerous books and articles have been written about Father Coughlin’s influence on public perceptions and attitudes regarding the issues of the day. Popular biographies penned in the early 1930’s by Mugglebee and Ward attempted to answer questions regarding his impact on societal norms and values, questions that continue to be posed over seventy years later. In *Father Coughlin: The Radio Priest of the Shrine of The Little Flower*, Ruth Mugglebee asked if Coughlin was a miracle man or a menace. Acknowledging the power of the microphone on the public at large, the author brought a sense to her work that Father Coughlin had the power to control events. She wrote that “when Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the president

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1.

of the United States in March 1933, at the peak of the country's depression, the man most dominantly responsible for his election, and the most loyal of the New Deal policies was the radio priest."¹⁰⁹ Within two years, Coughlin would change his opinion of Roosevelt, who he said was "wedded to the money-changers."¹¹⁰

The influence of the "money-changers" (i.e. Jews) was pervasive in Father Coughlin's teachings. To counter them, Coughlin founded the National Union for Social Justice in 1934. Additionally, the National Union's *raison d'être* included an all-out war on what he termed the anti-Christian, Communist, and Fascist fronts. His popularity among right-wingers and anti-Semites played right into the hands of Kuhn and the German-American Bund. Coughlin repeatedly used the 'Judeo-Bolshevik threat' as a theme, asserting that the entire Soviet leadership, including both Lenin and Stalin, was Jewish. He also accused American Jewish financiers of collaborating with the Bolsheviks to uproot Christianity in Russia and argued that all the ills of modern society was caused by a Communist-Jewish conspiracy.¹¹¹

His *Social Justice Weekly* magazine, widely read throughout the 1930s, continually proclaimed the evils of Judaism as a destructive force among nations. To Coughlin, "greedy" Capitalism and Judaism were one and the same. Among the teachings to be found between its covers was the idea that outside of Christianity, all was darkness, confusion, and despair: "Let us have a Christian Front! A Christian Front which will not tear to be called 'anti-Semitic' because it knows the term 'anti-Semitic'

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Mugglebee, *Father Coughlin The Radio Priest, of The Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1933), 323.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹¹¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Holocaust." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005143> (accessed July 2, 2008).

is only another pet phrase of castigation in Communism's glossary of attack."¹¹²

Father Coughlin was vehement in his attacks upon the Jews, going so far as to publish what is arguably the most notorious of the anti-Semitic polemics, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which came out in serial form over several issues of *Social Justice*. Many of his speeches were taken verbatim from earlier speeches that had been delivered by Joseph Goebbels. In a shocking example of exactly how deep his sympathies towards the Nazis lay, Coughlin gave the Nazi salute at a rally in the Bronx in 1938. Historian William Manchester quoted him as saying, "When we get through with the Jews in America, they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing."¹¹³ His verbal response to the attack on Jewish businesses and synagogues in Germany in November 1938 (commonly called Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass) was to pontificate that, "Jewish persecution only followed after Christians first were persecuted."¹¹⁴

Coughlin's introduction to Kuhn and the German American Bund was precipitated by his association with the virulently anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi group, the Christian Front. The Front promoted Christian businesses, going so far as to publish what amounted to a Christian Yellow Pages. The group came to view Father Coughlin as their inspiration; one might even say he acted as the Front's mascot.

Of course, Father Coughlin's stance on the Jews, as well as his growing

¹¹² *Social Justice*, July 25, 1938. <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAcoughlinE.htm> (accessed July 2, 2008).

¹¹³ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 176.

¹¹⁴ Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 66.

following among other anti-Semitic organizations, among the anti-Semitic Christian Front and other anti-Jew, pro-Nazi groups, didn't fail to get Kuhn's attention. Always looking for a way to market the Bund to the American public, Kuhn could not do better than to seek the support of the man who received so much fan mail that he required numerous secretaries to handle the flow of incoming letters.

Although Coughlin never formed any association with the Bund that might be termed "official," Kuhn hand-picked men to act as liaisons to the priest. Kuhn's representatives would make the trek to Coughlin's parish to discuss their common interests. One Bund member, William Wernenke, told a government investigator that he had attended a conference with Father Coughlin. When the investigator expressed doubt as to his veracity, Wernenke "produced a letter written on Father Coughlin's private stationary and signed by the priest asking that Wernenke come to Royal Oak for the conference."¹¹⁵

Kuhn was in fact a great admirer of Father Coughlin, having stated during his testimony before the Dies Committee that he recommended to all his followers that they "read Social Justice, which contains the truth as to who is trying to destroy the Constitution of the United States."¹¹⁶ Front page headlines proclaimed that Kuhn and Coughlin were cooperating with one another. During Kuhn's interview with members of the McNaboe Committee, Kuhn was asked who he thought were the enemies of the United States. His reply gave a clear indication that he viewed both Father Coughlin and himself as engaging in the same struggle. Q: "Mr. Kuhn, just who would you say that your organization was fighting against?" A: "I would say that my organization is

¹¹⁵ Warren, *Radio Priest*, 179.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

fighting against the Communists, which are controlled by the Jews like Trotsky.” Q: “Do you feel that you are perhaps attacking those of the Jewish religion in the United States unfairly?” A: “We are fighting the enemies of the United States. Just like other groups, just like Father Coughlin’s people. We fight for our country.”¹¹⁷

Numerous interactions in the mid and late 1930s between the various anti-Semitic groups provided the opportunities necessary to strengthen the bonds between Coughlin and the Bund. John Roy Carlson wrote that, “Father Coughlin had sponsored mass Communist parade in Manifestation of Christianity’ rallies. Coughlinite hooligans were going to be there to guard Christians against the Jews. The Bund boys were going to be there as well.”¹¹⁸ Many of the attendees, regardless of organizational affiliation, were given the responsibility of selling the *Social Justice Weekly*. It is likely that given the “mission” both groups had embarked upon, that part of the proceeds from the sale of the magazine were diverted from Father Coughlin’s coffers to that of the Bund’s.

The overlap of the Coughlinites and the Bund members was startling. Members affiliated with Father Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice could be seen marching in the streets with members of both the Bund and the Christian Front. Some of Coughlin’s faithful were heard to yell in tandem with Bund members, “God Bless Hitler, Franco, and Father Coughlin.”¹¹⁹ *Social Justice Weekly* began to proclaim, “Read Social Justice and learn how to solve the Jewish question.”¹²⁰ Father Coughlin and Fritz Kuhn had found that each could serve the other’s needs. They were unified by

¹¹⁷ New York. *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee To Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1939),1379.

¹¹⁸ John Roy Carlson, *Undercover*, 62.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

a mutual hatred of the Jews and Communism, as well as the belief in the primacy of Nazi ideals. Each man's so-called "American" movement was in reality a movement based on the belief in racial and religious superiority. Interestingly, both men used their antipathy towards "Communism" as a partial rationale for their movements' existence. Coughlin's writings and radio speeches contain numerous references to the Communist threat (an obvious euphemism for the perceived Jewish threat.)

This is apparent with Kuhn's speeches as well. In testimony before the Un-American Propaganda Committee, Kuhn is asked by Congressman Starnes what exactly is the purpose of the German American Bund. Kuhn's answer is true to form. "The German American Bund was created to fight the Communists in this country."¹²¹ Given what we know about the Bund's ideology, it is safe to say that Kuhn's use of the term "Communist" is a euphemism in the same vein as Coughlin's.

Martin Dies, whose committee would cast light upon Communist and Nazi infiltration within the United States, later wrote that, "it was established through the testimony of Fritz Kuhn that the Bund had worked sympathetically with other organizations and had cooperated with them. Among these were. . . the Christian Front."¹²² Dies also established that Bund members were required to read various Nazi and Fascist materials, including the Reverend Charles E. Coughlin's publication, *Social Justice*.¹²³ Kuhn may well have had Father Coughlin in mind when he made the following statement before the Dies Committee on March 25, 1939: "We have hundreds of thousands of people who cannot afford to be seen with us, but still wholeheartedly or

¹²¹ *Hearings*, Vol. 2: 3718.

¹²² Martin Dies, *The Trojan Horse in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 310.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 311.

partly sympathize with us.”¹²⁴

By 1942, after America’s entry into the war, Coughlin’s anti-Semitic associations had caught up with him. The archbishop of Detroit ordered Coughlin to cease and desist from all political activities under threat of being defrocked; he complied with the order and retired in 1966, his reputation irretrievably damaged by the anti-Semitic views he held and his associations with anti-Semitic groups prior to the Second World War.

Unlike Kuhn’s predecessors, he set out to create a movement that was “star-studded.” By attempting to associate the movement with the famous names of the day who were empathetic to the cause, Kuhn felt assured of the viability of his movement and his continued longevity. In the summer of 1936, he scored the ultimate coup when he was offered an invitation to meet his hero, Adolf Hitler. The occasion would be the 1936 Olympics, which were to be held in Berlin.

The Bund leadership was beside itself with excitement. This was Kuhn’s opportunity to shine. A meeting with Hitler would, he believed, further strengthen and consolidate his position as Hitler’s chosen representative to lead the Bund movement. This in turn would prompt all other Nazi organizations within the United States to look towards him for leadership. Kuhn had tried for months to have himself designated as the supreme leader of all the German parties in the United States. Only Hitler could confer such an appellation and have it enacted. Kuhn prepared for his trip with a media blitz.

Nearly every issue of the *Beobachter* after April carried some reference to the upcoming trip. Kuhn offered personal invitations to all of his fellow Bund members to

¹²⁴ Ibid., 307.

accompany him on the journey. For those who could not make it, he suggested an alternative solution. Members were asked to contribute to a newly created “Olympic Fund,” which eventually accumulated over three thousand dollars that was to be given to Hitler. In addition to the money, Kuhn hoped to present Hitler with a *Goldene Buch der Amerika-deutschen*, or “Golden Book,” an elaborate leather-bound pictorial history of the Bund from its founding in 1924 that contained the signatures of 6,000 subscribers.¹²⁵

In June 1936, Kuhn and fifty members of the Bund and their families set sail for Germany. Arriving in early July, the group was welcomed by the mayors and representatives of the several cities it toured. In Stuttgart, Kuhn was met by none other than Fritz Gissibl, his predecessor who had established just twelve years previous the forerunner of the German American Bund. Gissibl had left the Friends of New Germany in shambles. Although Kuhn made no statements regarding the reunion, one might conjecture that he felt a certain sense of satisfaction that he had succeeded where Gissibl had failed. Kuhn’s movement, through the force of his personality, the flair and intensity of his delivery, and the adroitness of his marketing skills had succeeded in a scant six months to make its mark upon the American consciousness. Both Gissibl and Spanknoebel, who between them had controlled their respective movements for eleven years, were unable to achieve the growth or the impact experienced under Kuhn’s leadership.

On August 2, 1936, Kuhn finally realized his long-held dream. Stopping in front of Hitler’s chancellery on the Unten den Linden, Kuhn was escorted up the steps

¹²⁵ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 273.

and into the reception room where Hitler was waiting to greet him and the several Bund members who accompanied him. The introduction had been arranged by Sepp Shuster, a member of the Bund whose roots with the organization went back to Teutonia. Shuster was highly respected by the Nazi elite, having marched with Hitler during the abortive Beer Hall Putsch of 1923.

Kuhn's 1938 statement to the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law (commonly referred to as the McNaboe Report) belied the fact that he believed Hitler would anoint him leader of a Hitler-sanctioned National Socialist organization in the United States: "It was just a visit, and Mr. Hitler was kind enough to receive American citizens; he was very kind to us, but that don't mean anything else, does it?"¹²⁶ In fact, it meant everything to Kuhn. For the master of marketing and advertising, what better way to manifest his importance to the movement than to be photographed with the father of the Nazi movement, Adolf Hitler?

According to Georg Froeboese, Kuhn's chief lieutenant, Hitler shook hands with every member of the Bund, looking each one in the eye. When Kuhn approached him, Hitler placed his hand on the American Fuehrer's shoulder and thanked him for the fight Kuhn was waging against the immoral press. Hitler wanted to know about the Bund's future plans and asked if Kuhn's travels throughout Germany had been warm and welcoming, to which Kuhn replied in the affirmative. Kuhn then gave Hitler the testimonial "Golden Book," which Hitler perused for a few minutes. He also gave him the monetary donation that had been collected for the German Winter Relief Fund.

Froeboese wrote that Hitler bade them farewell and ended the meeting with the

¹²⁶ New York. *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee To Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law*, 1361.

statement, “Go over there and continue the fight.”¹²⁷ Upon his return to the United States, Kuhn would repeat this last remark to others, interpreting Hitler’s aside as an affirmation of Kuhn’s leadership and of the direction in which he was taking the Bund.

Kuhn’s short visit, which was outlined in an August 4, 1936 *New York Times* article, would provide the publicity necessary to vault him onto the front pages of the major newspapers. In Kuhn’s mind, the public would no longer read about the German American Bund, but instead would read about the exploits of Fritz Kuhn’s German American Bund. Kuhn discussed the visit with Hitler in “*Bund Command #1*,” the first in a series of edicts laid out by the American Fuehrer to the membership. In addition to revealing that the trip had been a success, Kuhn thanked all the members of the Bund who had contributed to the *Golden Book* and to the Winter Relief Fund. The phrase that convinced Kuhn’s followers that his meeting with Hitler had indeed been a success was, “I know today better than ever before, the direction in which our Bund must go.”¹²⁸

Not surprisingly, Kuhn downplayed the chain of events that had transpired to create the opportunity for a meeting with Hitler. Totally ignoring the Sepp Shuster connection, Kuhn testified about the meeting to the House Un-American Propaganda Activities Committee (Dies Committee) in August 1939. Congressman Joe Starnes of Alabama asked Kuhn who had arranged the meeting between him and Hitler. Kuhn responded that he had simply walked up to Hitler’s secretary, announced that he was a representative of a German American group, and asked to see Hitler.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, August 18, 1936.

¹²⁸ *Bund Command I*, October 28, 1936.

¹²⁹ U.S. Congress, House, 76th Congress, 1st Session, *Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the U.S., Hearings*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 3785.

Although Kuhn proceeded to use the encounter with Hitler to his greatest advantage, the truth of the matter was that the meeting held no significance at all for Hitler. He neither promised nor committed anything to Fritz Kuhn or the German-American Bund. In Hitler's eyes, the gathering had simply been one of hundreds that had taken place during the period of time surrounding the Berlin Olympics. In 1937, Hitler's ambassador to the United States, Hans Heinrich Dieckhoff, discussed Kuhn's visit with Hitler. According to Dieckhoff, Hitler expressed the sentiment that it had been a mistake to meet with Kuhn and to allow photographs to be taken: "He had only seen Kuhn once and did not wish to see him again. The photographs were unfortunate, but [he felt it was] hardly his fault, since it was at the Olympic Games where one was photographed with all sorts of people."¹³⁰

When Kuhn returned home in September 1936, he was both elated and disappointed. He was elated by the fact that the multiple photographs taken during the meeting with Hitler would solidify his hold over the Bund, convincing those who were still balking at his leadership that he was indeed Hitler's chosen man to lead a reinvigorated Nazi party in America. He was disappointed because he knew it was a sham. Hitler had not acknowledged him as the American Fuehrer and had not placed the mantle of leadership of a new American Nazi Party upon him. In fact, based upon Hitler's later statement about the meeting, it appears that he was just "going through the motions" with Kuhn and the other members of the Bund. This lack of results did not deter Kuhn from utilizing the photographs as a major propaganda tool in order to induce more German Americans to jump on the Nazi bandwagon.

¹³⁰ Alex Abella and Scott Gordon, *Shadow Enemies: Hitler's Secret Terrorist Plot Against the United States* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2002), 277.

Kuhn realized that in order to maintain and strengthen his position, he must continue to lie to the membership and the public at large about his relationship with Hitler, which in reality was non-existent. Both Gissibl and Spanknoebel had lost their positions precisely because their leadership had never been sanctioned by the Hitler regime. Between the time of his meeting with Hitler in 1936 and his downfall in 1939, Kuhn never renounced the fantasy he created. Kuhn claimed in 1937 that he had a “certain, special arrangement” with Hitler and Germany should Bund members have any problems with any of the German consuls stationed in the multiple Bund districts: “Any problems I encounter will be taken up directly with the German Ambassador. If I get no satisfaction, I will go straight to Germany.”¹³¹ Later, Kuhn also made the claim that German Ambassador Hans Luther had lost his position to Hans Heinrich Dieckhoff in 1937 because of Luther’s refusal to collaborate on Bund activities. According to Kuhn, Dieckhoff would give him no problems because the new ambassador was aware of the special esteem and admiration that held for Kuhn.¹³²

Throughout 1937 and 1938, Kuhn’s ruse continued to impress the faithful. At the same time, Nazi officials in Germany were becoming extremely annoyed at what they considered Kuhn’s blatherings. Kuhn’s statements of personal friendship with Hitler so irritated the Nazi hierarchy that by 1938, Hitler’s propaganda machine began to publicly repudiate the German American Bund. This repudiation did not stop Kuhn from visiting Germany again in 1938 and declaring to his followers upon his return that he had been invited to meetings with the Nazi elite, including Goering and Goebbels.

¹³¹ Justice Department, “*Outline of Evidence against the German-American Bund*” (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith, 1942).

¹³² Ibid.

He also implied that he had attended a meeting with someone who would remain unnamed, but that this “someone” had given assurances that Kuhn would indeed continue as the unquestioned leader of the Bund.¹³³ Suspiciously, there is no confirmation from either Bund or government records that corroborates Kuhn’s story about his 1938 get-together with top Nazi officials, particularly in regards to the mysterious “someone,” whose identity Kuhn never revealed. In the process of conducting research, I could not locate any extant records indicating that there was ever a conference held between Hitler and Kuhn after 1936, nor that he actually accomplished anything on his second trip.

Despite the fact that Nazi Germany had no interest in maintaining significant ties with the Bund, the Kuhn years were the most successful and most significant for the organization. During these sometimes tumultuous days of Bund prosperity and growth, Kuhn issued a number of orders intended to relay his will upon the membership. Kuhn ruled the Bund with an iron fist, and his perceived personal association with Hitler allowed him to create a stranglehold within the organization.

Deviation from Bund orders was not tolerated. With *Bund Command #2*, issued on October 29, 1936, Kuhn ordered all members and associated German Americans to vote for Alf Landon in the 1936 presidential election. In the order, Kuhn explains that his endorsement is based upon his belief that Landon would be a better bulwark against the ever-present Communist threat. More importantly, though, the presidential candidate would look more favorably upon U.S.-Germany economic relations. He also pointed out that it was the Democratic Party that had plunged America into a war with

¹³³ Ibid.

Germany, causing great destruction to the German homeland and great suffering to the German people.¹³⁴

Kuhn spent his years in power instituting an economic base within the Bund that would create a financially stable organization. As previously mentioned, in the three years after his accession as Bundesfuehrer, he established six separate companies, including the German American Business League (*Deutscher Konsum Verband*, or DKV), the German American Bund Auxiliary, the AV Development Corporation, the previously discussed AV Publishing, the Prospective Citizens League, and the German American Settlement League. The DKV had been organized during the days of the Friends of New Germany to “counteract the Jewish boycott of German goods and services, and to promote trade between Germany and the United States.”¹³⁵ The corporation marketed many services for German Americans, including conducting yearly exhibitions of German goods, selling trading stamps, publishing trade and business guides, and offering discounts on products purchased from Germany. All of the companies’ activities were overseen by Kuhn, who had authority over the disposition of profits.

According to Diamond, Kuhn’s success was due in part to his adherence to the leadership principle; Kuhn’s unlimited dictatorial control over the membership and his demand for unconditional loyalty. For his followers, the Kuhn was a stand-in for Hitler. Through Kuhn and his movement, transplanted German nationals, veterans of the defeated German army, members of the Freikorps movement and Jew-haters could

¹³⁴ *Bund Command #2*, October 29, 1936.

¹³⁵ Justice Department, “*Outline of Evidence against the German-American Bund*” (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith, 1942).

rally around the National Socialist banner. In effect, by participating in the Bund, members could live the life of an authentic Nationalist Socialist vicariously.¹³⁶

The Bund became its own self-contained world. Members were able to have most of their needs met through Bund-controlled shops and businesses. Susan Canedy states that Bundists [and their families] found it possible to live their entire existence within the group's framework.¹³⁷ Bund membership furnished many benefits, not the least of which was to provide a bond with those of a similar worldview and a shared cultural heritage. In fact, on a local basis, the Bund was relatively apolitical. Members celebrated life cycle events, such as marriages, births, and death, in a communal fashion. A subdivision of the German American Bund Auxiliary, the Women's Auxiliary, was instrumental in providing the necessities of life for those less fortunate within the movement.¹³⁸ As discussed earlier, the system of children's camps throughout the United States (the largest being Camp's Siegfried and Nordland) contributed greatly to family and community camaraderie. The camps' role in the indoctrination of the Bund members' children further solidified the movement's hold on the next generation.

The Kuhn years were years of palpable excitement and energy. There were continuous rallies; the children's camps were filled to capacity; members gathered weekly in brotherhood and to commiserate about the Jewish-controlled government and press. Kuhn, always searching for a way to integrate "Americanism" within the theme of National Socialism, began utilizing George Washington as the movement's mascot.

¹³⁶ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 248.

¹³⁷ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 125.

¹³⁸ *The New York Times*, April 13, 1937.

During OD drills, which took place on a regular basis, large photographs of George Washington, framed in a Nazi swastika, could be seen in the background.

The number of rallies continued to grow throughout 1937 and 1938, particularly in New York City. Numerous articles appeared in the *New York Times* recounting the tumult of the gatherings. According to one news report describing a rally at New York City's Hippodrome on February 12, 1937, four thousand sympathizers heard denunciations of Congressman Dickstein, the Jewish rabble-rousers, the anti-Nazi boycott, and the Jewish-Communist connection.¹³⁹

Hollywood writers, directors and producers had made no effort to fight the growth of the Bund in the first couple of years of its existence. This all changed in 1938, when Warner Brothers produced a film that was to become a cult classic. Starring Edward G. Robinson, the film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, was based upon a February 1938 FBI sting operation that had broken up a large German spy ring operating in the New York City area.¹⁴⁰ The film represented a sea change in the United States position on Nazi Germany. Heretofore, the United States had maintained a position of neutrality towards Hitler's Germany, and this stand had been respected by Hollywood. The release of the film in 1939 was an *a priori* acknowledgement by the Roosevelt administration in its belief that Germany was aiding and abetting the Nazi movement in the United States.

The Bund, which was lambasted in the film, manifested its outrage by publishing its own analysis of the film. Historian and film critic Dr. Eric J. Sandeen

¹³⁹ *The New York Times*, February 13, 1937.

¹⁴⁰ Eric J. Sandeen, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy and the German-American Bund," *Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 2 (1979), 69.

analyzed the Bund's review, which he stated could hardly be called impartial. The Bund reviewer wrote, "*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was produced by Jew Jack Warner, with story written by Jew Milton Krims. With actor Jew Emmanuel Goldenburg [Edward G. Robinson], directed by Jew Anatole Litvak, technical advisor Jew Rabbi Herman Lissauer, historical director Jew Leon Turrou."¹⁴¹ The reviewer went on to state the film showed "a Jewish lack of originality and it overshoots the mark, as always with Jews."¹⁴² Sandeen notes that Bund members were portrayed as gangsters and street fighters (akin to Hitler's S.A in the 1920s and early 1930s). Believing that he and his movement had been mocked by the "Hollywood Jews," Kuhn filed a five million dollar libel suit against Warner Brothers, which was dropped when Kuhn was found guilty of embezzling Bund funds later in the year. The movie did quite well upon its release, and the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures named it one of the four best films of 1939, along with *Wuthering Heights*, *Stagecoach*, and *Young Mr. Lincoln*.¹⁴³

It was precisely this type of negative publicity that had induced Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis to disavow any relationship with the Bund in the past. German American Bund "antics" were alienating the American public and were beginning to influence the American government's neutrality towards the Nazi government. The release of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was further confirmation of growing American suspicion and fears. The film, to many Americans, was further "evidence" that Nazis were infiltrating America at every level of society.

When German nationals were directed to leave the Friends of New Germany in

¹⁴¹ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, May 24, 1939.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *The New York Times*, November 29, 1939.

1935, Kuhn had gotten around the edict by renaming the organization. In the intervening years, multiple orders were issued by the German government reminding the German population in America that it was against German policy for them to join the Bund. In 1937, and again in 1938, German Ambassador Dieckhoff insisted to American government officials that relations, or what there was of it, between the Bund and the Nazi government, had been broken off entirely. On March 1, 1938, the *New York Herald-Tribune* published a letter from Dieckhoff to United States Secretary of State Cordell Hull confirming the German Government's position on the German American Bund and reiterating unequivocally that German citizens must not belong to the German American Bund or to any possible successor organizations of that kind. German citizens who refused to resign from the Bund would lose their German citizenship.¹⁴⁴ The embarrassment that Kuhn and his cohorts continued to cause the Third Reich because of the Bund members' aggressive actions, such as fighting and destruction of property, compelled Ambassador Dieckhoff to place a statement on file with the State Department. The statement was reproduced on page two of the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* on October 20, 1938. That Kuhn would allow it to be printed in the *Beobachter* underscores the fact that perhaps he saw it as innocuous, or he refused to believe it. Dieckhoff stated that, "the German Government has always taken the view that the *Amerikadeutscher Volksbund* (German American Bund) is to be considered as a purely American affair. There has never existed any open or secret understanding between the Bund and the German Ambassador, the German Embassy or the German Consulates."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *New York Herald-Tribune*, March 1, 1938.

¹⁴⁵ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, October 20, 1938.

Whatever the case, by 1938, the Bund's anti-Semitic rantings, violence, and perceived pro-Germany, anti-American stance once again brought it to the attention of Congress. The call for another probe into the German American Bund's activities was led by none other than the standard-bearer of the 1934 House investigation into Nazi influence in the United States, Congressman Samuel Dickstein of New York.

Although the Bund had done much to promote its so-called "Americanism," it had never successfully made the case that it was anything other than a pro-Nazi cabal. In 1938, Congress finally had had enough of the charade. Taking up Dickstein's passionate cause, a new commission was formed. Led by Congressman Martin Dies of Texas, the House Un-American Activities Committee, or the Dies Committee as it was more commonly known, would begin to reveal the inner workings of the Bund under Fritz Kuhn to the American public. The congressman let it be known that more than twenty-five civic organizations supported the aims and goals of the new committee, including the Non-Sectarian Nazi League and the German-American League for Culture.¹⁴⁶ The latter organization's support brought home to Americans the reality that not every German advocated the German American Bund's message of anti-Semitic rhetoric and pro-Nazi propaganda.

In May 1938, Congress passed House Resolution 282, with a mandate to "investigate (1) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States; (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our

¹⁴⁶ William Gellerman, *Martin Dies* (New York: Putnam Press, 1944), 64.

Constitution.”¹⁴⁷

Hearings commenced on August 12, 1938. Between the start of the hearings and December 5, 1939, when Kuhn was sent to prison for embezzlement, Kuhn’s world would be torn apart by revelations of financial mismanagement, tax evasion and misappropriation of Bund funds. The year which began with Kuhn’s greatest triumph (the Madison Square Garden Rally in celebration of Washington’s Birthday) ended with his imprisonment in Sing-Sing Prison.

¹⁴⁷ U.S. Congress. House, 75th Congress, 3rd Session, Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the United States, *Hearings*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.:1938), 1.

CHAPTER FOUR

The American Fuehrer Meets His Fate

The German American Bund attained the height of its success in the two years preceding Kuhn's downfall. During that period, 1937 and 1938, the Bund's recruitment numbers grew tremendously in each of the local divisions. The children's camps were filled to capacity, the Bund marches, particularly in New York City, provided a continuing source of coverage through newspaper reporting, and money continued to flow into the coffers of Kuhn's financial division. Unfortunately for Kuhn, the success of the Bund caused a backlash, as Americans began to identify the German American Bund as an arm of the German government. George Britt wrote that "by 1937, all major power groups in the United States, including labor, business, religious, and intellectual communities had condemned the Third Reich."¹⁴⁸ That condemnation was passed on to what was seen as the symbol of the Third Reich in the United States, the German American Bund. Also coming to light during this period, and of deep concern to the Jewish organizations attempting to fight the Nazi menace in the United States were several articles in the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* that delineated methods for fighting and undermining Jewish life in the United States. A writer for the paper wrote that a "united German American community should make war against the Jews and their influence. The Jewish rabble must be contained."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ George Britt, "Poison in the Melting Pot," *Nation* 148, April 1, 1939, 374.

¹⁴⁹ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, October 28, 1937.

In light of the growing influence of the Bund, Jewish Congressman Samuel Dickstein, who had been co-chairman of the McCormick Committee in 1934, went on the attack against the Bundists: “He concentrated on alerting the public to the potential dangers of permitting Bundists to ape Nazi ways and to spread Nazi propaganda.”¹⁵⁰ Kuhn quickly designated Dickstein as the enemy and as a representative of the Jewish cabal that was attempting to destroy the American way of life. Kuhn and his cohorts immediately went to work vilifying Dickstein. Fritz Kuhn stated to his the Bund membership that “we are a fighting organization and we must welcome every fight.”¹⁵¹

Dickstein supplied lists of alleged Nazi spies in the United States and had them published in the *Congressional Quarterly*. He also teamed up with Congressman Martin Dies of Texas to introduce a resolution that provided for a congressional investigation of subversive activities in the United States. During these developments, Kuhn continued to play the part of the American Fuehrer as though Dickstein and Dies were of, seemingly, no consequence. He made appearances at Camps Nordland and Siegfried, where children (and on weekends, parents) were treated to Nazi tunes such as the “Horst Wessel Song” and colorful rallies proclaiming the end of the eventual demise of Jewish Communism in America: “During this time, Kuhn’s people saturated the mail with protest letters against Dickstein, appealed for finances, and continued the drive to contact community leaders. Along with the mass rallies, Kuhn’s efforts amounted to a striking display of energy, dedication, and zeal.”¹⁵²

Although Kuhn projected an outward appearance of calm, he was deeply

¹⁵⁰ “Woes of a Fuehrer,” *Newsweek* 13, June 5, 1939, 12.

¹⁵¹ *Bund Command* #8, April 18, 1937.

¹⁵² “Nazi Agents in the U.S.,” *Fortune* 22, no. 4 (Oct. 1940), 47-48.

concerned about the growing government threat to the Bund's existence. On the heels of Dies and Dickstein's attempt to organize a congressional investigation of Kuhn and the Bund, in August 1937, U.S. Attorney General Homer S. Cummings ordered the FBI to investigate the Bund camps to ascertain if any federal laws had been, or were, being broken. Kuhn initially agreed to allow the FBI access to all camp records, but soon thereafter, claimed that he and his organization were being persecuted. He told congressional investigators that if German Americans came under the jurisdiction of the FBI, they would be considered no different than the murderers, gangsters, counterfeiters, rapists, and all outlaws from society."¹⁵³

Despite the confidence he exuded, Kuhn instructed his unit leaders and other high-ranking members of the Bund to be on the lookout for government infiltrators. Members were told not to have conversations with strangers, no questions concerning the size and the strength of the Bund were to be discussed, and identification papers of anyone wishing to join the Bund must be studied carefully. Most importantly, the leadership of each of the units throughout the United States must make it clear that the German American Bund was an American organization with no ties to Nazi Germany. All verbal attacks on President Roosevelt should immediately cease and desist.¹⁵⁴

Utilizing a strategy intended to mislead, Kuhn prepared a document that supplied answers to many of the questions that might be asked of a Bund member. According to Kuhn, the standing orders of the OD were to keep control at meetings and

¹⁵³ U.S. Congress, House, 76th Congress, 1st Session, *Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the U.S., Hearings*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 3788.

¹⁵⁴ Justice Department, "*Outline of Evidence against the German American Bund*" (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, 1942).

to be available to the local, state, or federal government in case of an emergency. The children's camps were strictly for recreation; young people were there to enjoy sports and older people came to enjoy the scenic view and participate picnics with family and friends. The *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, the newspaper of the Bund, was used to keep Bund members informed of news and upcoming activities. Yes, the articles within conveyed a sympathetic view of Germany, but it was certainly not an instrument of Nazi propaganda. The DKV was an agency of the Bund that acted to protect Bund members who were economically hurt through the boycott of German goods.¹⁵⁵

Despite growing opposition from Congress and American anti-Nazis who spread the warning of the Nazi-Bund connection through radio and newspaper, the year 1937 ended triumphantly for Kuhn and the Bund. Kuhn arrogantly proclaimed that in the future, the Bund would return "blow for blow."¹⁵⁶

Throughout this period, officials of the government focused on methods for dismantling the Bund. Beginning in 1938, there were numerous investigations by state and federal authorities in an attempt to "put the Bund out of business" once and for all. This was due mainly to the continuing efforts of Dies and Dickstein, who were stunned to find that U.S. Attorney General Homer S. Cummings FBI investigation had concluded that the Bund had not violated any federal laws. The finding emboldened Kuhn, who embarked on a publicity tour in January 1938.

Kuhn's flaunting of the Bund's apparent victory angered many officials. Kuhn also sent his top official, G. Wilhelm Kunze, Bund publicity director, to speak to the membership in both the east and the mid-west regions: "Kunze was given the authority

¹⁵⁵ *Bund Command* #13, September 14, 1937

¹⁵⁶ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, December 23, 1937.

to create new units, and local leaders were told to advertise his upcoming arrival and to invite both American and German outsiders, so that large crowds appeared wherever he spoke.”¹⁵⁷

After Hitler’s move into Austria in March 1938, the voices of the Bund critics became harsher, and a sense of urgency pervaded their messages. Nazi infiltration of the United States via the Bund was now a clear and present danger to many. The McNaboe Committee, issuing its *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law for the State of New York* in 1939 wrote “the committee in its work has dealt almost exclusively with the German American Bund chiefly because it is the outstanding organization of its type. In its comparatively brief career, it has reached a stage of development, both financially and otherwise, greater than the other Fascist organizations.”¹⁵⁸

The investigation also found that, “although the committee has adduced no direct evidence that it is the intention of the Bund to overthrow this country by means of force, the record does indicate the possibility that such might be the ultimate objective of the Bund.”¹⁵⁹ Upon learning of the “Fuehrer Principle” during the hearings, officials came to the conclusion that Fritz Kuhn’s leadership of the Bund was the engine that sustained the Bund’s efforts. He was the unifying force that allowed the Bund to maintain whatever success it had achieved during the 1937-1938 period.

James Wheeler-Hill was interviewed by the McNaboe Committee on June 22, 1938. He volunteered that the unity, and in his opinion the success, of the movement

¹⁵⁷ Britt, “Poison in the Melting Pot,” *Nation* 148, April 1, 1939, 375.

¹⁵⁸ New York. *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee To Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1939), 283.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

was due to Fritz Kuhn's leadership and strict adherence to the Fuehrer Principle: "So according to this so-called 'Fuehrer Principle,' you must carry out Fritz Kuhn's orders without question?" "Yes, we are sworn to follow it when we become members of the organization." "This gives Mr. Kuhn total power over the German American Bund, does it not?" "Well, in my opinion, Mr. Kuhn has done great things for our organization, and the Fuehrer Principle is part of the reason." "Do you feel that your organization would be as successful as you say it is were it not for the Fuehrer Principle and the efforts of Mr. Kuhn?" "Well. Of course it is my opinion and my opinion only, but I feel Mr. Kuhn has given strength and a pride to our organization where it did not exist before."¹⁶⁰ The members of the committee realized that the key to their success in destroying the Bund lay in "dethroning" Fritz Kuhn.

The passage of House Resolution 282 in May 1938, which called for the investigation of "subversive or un-American propaganda" led to several investigations into Bund activities in addition to John McNaboe's state senate investigation, most famously, the Dies Commission. When Kuhn found out that Congressman Dickstein was not chosen to serve on the committee (due perhaps to his zealous approach towards the Bund), he sent the congressman a sarcastic note that read, "My sincerest condolences on your political funeral. Am sorry you are not on the Dies Committee because I lose the opportunity to finish you in one round."¹⁶¹ Other inquiries focused on the German American Settlement League and its legal right to purchase land for children's camps that promoted pro-Nazi ideology, and Mayor La Guardia's inquest

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 1313.

¹⁶¹ *The New York Times*, May 27, 1938

into the German American Bund's financial dealings.

The intensity of the growing inquiries and the negative publicity engendered by articles published in the daily newspapers began to damage Bund finances as advertising revenues decreased. Former advertisers, worried that the light of government probes might begin to shine on them, began to pull their ads from Bund publications, most notably the *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*.¹⁶² Through a series of Bund Commands throughout 1938, Kuhn implemented emergency measures to raise needed revenues. He forced members to collect discarded metals such as tin, zinc, and copper for sale to junk dealers; he also required the membership to hold more fund-raising dances and concerts.¹⁶³ The revenues received from these sources were not enough to cover costs, and Kuhn predicted dire consequences in the upcoming year. Still, he attempted to keep the spirit of the movement strong by stating the importance of maintaining confidence and removing any doubt: "May we never forget that we are a militant organization and that we shall remain fighting lies, slander, Marxism, and racially foreign cliques until victory is ours."¹⁶⁴

The American public was becoming more sensitized to the Nazi danger on nearly a daily basis in 1938, and Fritz Kuhn was the face and the symbol of that potential danger. The Nazi menace was being proclaimed on the front page of every major newspaper. Hitler moved his troops into Austria in March of that year, and in October, Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland. In November, on the heels of the killing of a minor German official in Paris by a Jew named Herschel Grynszpan,

¹⁶² *Bund Command XVII*, June 22, 1938.

¹⁶³ *Bund Commands*, 1938.

¹⁶⁴ *Bund Command XVI*, June 10, 1938.

the Nazi government sanctioned the destruction of Jewish synagogues and businesses in Germany.

Known as “Kristallnacht” (Night of Broken Glass), it was the first direct government action against German Jews. On November 11, 1938, the *New York Times* front page banner proclaimed in bold print, “*Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples Until Goebbels Calls Halt.*”¹⁶⁵ American outrage was palpable, and the Dies Commission’s mandate became more urgent as the fear of Nazi infiltration via the Bund became more pronounced. Fritz Kuhn continued to feed the public’s fear by organizing an even greater number of marches and Bund rallies, and by continuously reminding his followers that he was a personal friend of Hitler, which was patently untrue. Of course, although this may have impressed both Bund members and potential members, it only heightened the fear of fear of the general public that Hitler was invading the United States in the guise of the German American Bund. In addition, the statement by Kuhn of his close friendship with Hitler was a powerful inducement in keeping Bund members under Kuhn’s sway.

Congressman Dies pursued a different tactic in 1938 than his predecessor, Congressman McCormack, had done in the 1934 hearings. Whereas the McCormack Commission had focused on the Bund’s role as a subversive organization that dispersed Nazi propaganda, Dies focused on the Bund’s role in inciting treason against the United States. In his introduction to Volume Seven of the Committee’s *Hearings*, Dies wrote that, “this committee came into existence several years after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party had put in motion their plan of spreading Nazism throughout the world. . . the

¹⁶⁵ *The New York Times*, November 11, 1938.

United States was no exception, for Hitler planted in our midst many of his trusted agents who were carrying on their treasonable work unmolested.”¹⁶⁶ Although this may have had a ring of truth to it, Dies’ claim, whether or not he realized it, certainly did not apply to the German American Bund. As has been discussed, Hitler had no use for what he perceived were troublemakers bent on causing a rift between German and American relations. He had formed this opinion as early as 1935 in relation to the Friends of New Germany, and his opinion had not changed with the organization’s successor, the German American Bund. In any event, Dies’ job was to play to the fears of the American public, and if he knew that his claims were outlandish, it would not change his ultimate goal, which was the destruction of Fritz Kuhn and the German American Bund.

Throughout the hearings, pressure was brought to bear upon the members by the committee to admit that their allegiance was to Nazi Germany and not to the United States. Scared that they would be imprisoned on charges of treason, many members of the Bund, who were in fact German nationals, emigrated back to Germany. Of course, this weakened the Bund significantly as its numbers began to decline precipitously.

A last gasp effort to bring in new “Americanized” members took place in September 1938. The three-day national convention, which began on September 3, was held in New York City’s Turnhalle Center. Kuhn was under pressure to reassure the attendees that all was well, despite the numerous state and federal investigations and the dwindling numbers on the membership rolls. Kuhn admitted to the many problems now facing the organization, including declining membership, financial instability due to a

¹⁶⁶ *Hearings*, Vol. 7, 1.

loss of advertising revenues, and in-fighting among the various divisions of the German American Bund.¹⁶⁷ Kuhn left the convention with not only the continued support of the membership, but with a brand new program designed to stop the impending implosion of the organization. Certainly, this speaks to Kuhn's ability as a skilled communicator who had the sense to create a new, positive agenda from the misfortunes currently striking the Bund. For the next eight months, Kuhn implemented the new eight-point program that delineated ways to increase finances and methods for increasing membership numbers, but any gains made in enrollment or in the area of financial solvency were relatively modest.

Meanwhile, the wheels of the Dies Committee continued to turn. Members of Kuhn's inner circle were being called to testify, although strangely, Kuhn himself was not called to appear before the committee until August 1939. Kuhn, who defined himself by his ability to control others, became paranoid at the thought that those he empowered might be testifying against him. In his *Bund Command XXI* of October 8, 1938, he wrote "the most dangerous opponents of a fighting movement are those who work secretly to undermine the leadership."¹⁶⁸

If Kuhn's leadership tactics were faltering by 1939, the survival of the Bund may have had much to do with the fact that the tactics of his enemies were also far from perfect. The Dies Committee, which had the popular support of seventy-four percent of the American public, was criticized for its methods.¹⁶⁹ One *New York Times* reporter who attended the hearings described them as "a mixture of plausible testimony with the

¹⁶⁷ *The New York Times*, September 8, 1938

¹⁶⁸ *Bund Command XXI*, October 8, 1938.

¹⁶⁹ Stuart Henderson Britt and Selden C. Menefee, "Did the Publicity of the Dies Committee in 1938 Influence Public Opinion?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (July 1939), 449.

practice of putting words in the witnesses' mouths and the almost universal failure to seek proof of startling accusations."¹⁷⁰ Another criticism pointed to the fact that committee members appeared to be grandstanding and making public statements, speeches, and radio addresses before the hearings were completed.¹⁷¹ Ironically, it appeared that the members of the Dies committee were employing many of the tactics utilized by Kuhn himself.

Throughout the remainder of 1938 and into 1939, dozens of witnesses appeared before the committee. None of those interviewed by the committee appeared to give testimony that could severely undermine Kuhn or his continuing role as the American Fuehrer. In February 1939, he reigned over his greatest "triumph," the Washington Birthday Celebration "Pro-American" Rally in Madison Square Garden, which is discussed in the introduction to this paper.

And then the bombshell struck that would destroy the reign of Fritz Kuhn forever. To the surprise of many, it was not the Dies Committee investigation that uncovered malfeasance on the part of Kuhn, but his loyal compatriots in the movement. Three members of the Bund, known as "the Three K's," became suspicious of Kuhn's handling of Bund funds. Diamond explains that Gerhard Kunze, who was in charge of public relations and publicity, August Klapprott, who operated the restaurant near Camp Nordland, and Wilbur Keegan, who acted as a part-time attorney for the Bund, discovered that Kuhn was stealing from the Bund.¹⁷² Although Kuhn did not know at the time that three of his lieutenants had turned on him, it was through their cooperation

¹⁷⁰ *The New York Times*, November 6, 1938.

¹⁷¹ *New York Daily News*, November 14, 1938.

¹⁷² Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 334.

that the New York State District Attorney, Thomas E. Dewey, was able to gain easy access to the Bund's financial records. Kunze, who had aspirations of becoming Bundesfuehrer one day, found his opportunity by convincing Klapprott and Keegan that the welfare of the Bund was at stake, and that they must turn Kuhn in if the organization were to financially solvent.¹⁷³

Prosecuting Kuhn on charges of embezzlement and (eventually) tax evasion was the brainchild of New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, a rabid anti-Nazi. Without a mandate from the federal government, but with the support of future presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey, who was then the state district attorney, he pledged to bring Kuhn to justice. With the Dies Committee shifting its focus away from the pro-Nazi groups and concentrating on the Communist threat due to the fact that the Communist threat was seen as a clear and present danger, Dies wrote that, "there is considerable evidence that thousands of new [Communist] recruits added to the rolls of labor unions each week."¹⁷⁴ LaGuardia reasoned that the only way to put Kuhn in prison was to find him guilty of, if not treason, than perhaps financial malfeasance.

After the propaganda boon that the Bund rally in Madison Square Garden had effectuated, La Guardia decided that it was time to destroy the Bund in his city. He also realized that putting Kuhn behind bars would in all likelihood spell the demise of the German American Bund itself. Unlike Kuhn's predecessors, who held positions in, but never became symbols of, their respective organizations, Kuhn *was* the Bund to many. By locking him up, La Guardia assumed that the wind would be taken out of the Bund sails once and for all. Later developments proved that his assumption was correct.

¹⁷³ *U.S. v. Kuhn and Nineteen Other Cases*, 49 F. Supp. 441(1943).

¹⁷⁴ Martin Dies, *The Trojan Horse in America* (New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1940), 147.

In March 1939, agents of the new “Special Tax Emergency Investigation” Unit broke into Bund headquarters, boxed up all of the Bund’s financial records, and brought them to District Attorney Dewey’s office. With potential incriminating evidence in hand, the district attorney’s office began its investigation. Along with investigating the possible non-payment of taxes on Bund propaganda materials sold to the public, the investigative unit was also charged with examining the records of the six separate business corporations set up by Kuhn upon his accession to the leadership of the Bund in 1936.

William Herlands, an attorney and friend of La Guardia’s, was given the responsibility of overseeing the financial aspects of the investigation and writing his conclusions. According to the Herlands Report, more than forty instances of tax evasion were found among the six corporations.¹⁷⁵ The *New York Times* broke the story, and its front page headline for May 18, 1939 read, “*Bund Tax Evasion Charged; Mayor Asks Dewey To Act.*”¹⁷⁶ Because each of these violations in and of themselves did not guarantee a long prison sentence for Kuhn, Dewey insisted that Herlands search for more damaging material. Herlands discovered, in his review of the Bund’s ledger books, the “holy grail” for which he had been searching. Bund records indicated that Kuhn had embezzled a portion of the nearly \$15,000 that had been collected at the Madison Square Garden Rally in February. He was immediately indicted and his passport was confiscated.¹⁷⁷

Kuhn was arrested on May 27, but was released the next day after paying a bail

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 346.

¹⁷⁶ *The New York Times*, May 18, 1939.

¹⁷⁷ “Woes of a Fuehrer,” *Newsweek* 13, June 5, 1939, 12.

amount of \$5000. In September, District Attorney Dewey requested that Kuhn's bail be raised to \$50,000, which was acceded to by the court.¹⁷⁸ Kuhn's bail was paid for through a bail fund that had been set up by the membership the previous year. Even after the indictment had come down, the great majority of Bund members held fast to the belief that Kuhn was being set up in a conspiracy controlled by District Attorney "Jewey" and his cabal of Jewish power brokers. The membership was told to fight against the evil perpetrators and to continue to give money for Kuhn's defense because, according to the Bund's propagandists, "*Kuhn is the Bund.*"¹⁷⁹ This statement clearly indicates the hold that Kuhn had over the membership. No leader before or after was ever as readily ever identified with the Bund in this symbolic manner.

On August 16, 1939, Kuhn appeared before the House Un-American Propaganda Activities Committee. Under indictment, and with his trial for tax evasion and embezzlement only three months hence, Kuhn showed little concern for his future as he answered committee members' questions. He admitted to having been arrested previously for "drunkenness, profanity, and grand larceny."¹⁸⁰ When asked about his salary, Kuhn responded that he was paid three hundred dollars per month, with no other sources of income. He also claimed to have no personal bank accounts.¹⁸¹

The remainder of his two-day testimony was spent with Kuhn denying his allegiance to Nazi Germany; maintaining that he had no problems with the Jewish religion, but only with the Jews as a race; and establishing that the purpose of the German American Bund, in addition to inculcating pride of German heritage and

¹⁷⁸ *The New York Times*, September 30, 1939.

¹⁷⁹ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, 336.

¹⁸⁰ *Hearings*, Vol. 6, 3706.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3709.

culture in its membership, was to defeat Communism in the United States.¹⁸²

His testimony concluded, Kuhn was called back one last time in October for an additional five hours of questioning. On October 19, Kuhn was questioned about his association with other nationalistic and right-wing groups, such as the Silver Shirts and the Christian Front (with its Father Coughlin connection).¹⁸³ Nothing of substance that could be used against Kuhn came from either of the hearings. Kuhn's use of go-betweens in his dealings with other racist entities left him with plausible alibis in which he could claim no relationship or contact with any of the groups being discussed. He was quite savvy in his ability to use half-truths or outright lies (as when he stated that he had a personal relationship with Hitler) to outwit the government, and even his own membership. It fell to District Attorney Dewey to finally dispose of Kuhn. Perhaps as a professional courtesy, Dewey waited to begin trial proceedings until after Kuhn's testimony had been completed.

Kuhn's trial commenced on November 9, 1939. On December 5, he was found guilty of grand larceny, and on December 6, he was sentenced to two and a half to five years in Sing Sing Prison.¹⁸⁴ To add insult to injury, the day after Kuhn was sent to prison, the Bund's executive committee, led by Kuhn's hand-picked successor, Gerhard Wilhelm Kunze, voted the former American Fuehrer out of the Bund. This was a shock to Kuhn as Kunze had been chosen personally by Kuhn to act as his second-in-command. Canady notes that for all intents and purposes, the Bund ceased to exist with Kuhn's internment. Kunze's control of the Bund initiated a period of reduction in all

¹⁸² Ibid.; 3710-3727.

¹⁸³ *Hearings*, Vol. 10, 6043-6124.

¹⁸⁴ *The New York Times*, December 7, 1939.

Bund activities. Mention of the group in the newspapers virtually halted, and the Dies Committee concentrated on the Communist party and other left-wing organizations.¹⁸⁵

Although most of the public agreed with the severity of Kuhn's sentence, there were dissenters who felt that, however distasteful Kuhn's stand on the issues were, he had been treated unfairly. Perhaps the best known dissent came from corporate lawyer and future Republican presidential nominee, Wendell Willkie. Willkie wrote in *The New Republic*, "Now, you may hate Nazism as much as I do, but even a Nazi is still entitled, in America, to fair treatment under the law. In the Kuhn case, one wonders whether legal processes were not abused for political purposes. . . were his technical violations of law not an excuse for removing from society a man whose social tenets are undesirable?"¹⁸⁶

Kuhn would serve time in Sing-Sing until 1943, when he was transferred to the Foley Square Courthouse in New York City to await the verdict in his denaturalization case. He and nineteen other associates were indicted for "retaining allegiance to a foreign power at the time of their naturalization," which violated the Nationality Act of 1940.¹⁸⁷

On June 1, Kuhn's citizenship, which he had held since 1934, was revoked. Later that same month, he was paroled and transferred to an internment camp in New Mexico. In 1945, the one-time, so called "American Fuehrer" was deported to the Dachau Internment Camp in Dachau, Germany, finally being released in April 1946. He then moved to his native Munich, where he began working as an industrial chemist.

¹⁸⁵ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma*, 204-205.

¹⁸⁶ Wendell Willkie, "Fair Trial", *The New Republic*, March 18, 1940, 370.

¹⁸⁷ *U.S. v. Kuhn and Nineteen Other Cases*, 49 F. Supp. 407 (1943).

In July 1947, Kuhn was arrested during the post-war de-Nazification process, charged with attempting to transplant Nazism into the United States.¹⁸⁸ On February 3, 1948, Kuhn escaped from prison. European Command Headquarters put out an all points bulletin, containing the reference heading “Escaped German Prisoner,” which contained Kuhn’s approximate time of escape and his complete physical description.¹⁸⁹ In April 1948, Kuhn was tried *in absentia* to ten years at hard labor.¹⁹⁰ Free for six months, he was captured in the French-zone town of Bernkastel. Kuhn appealed his verdict, and was given credit for time served.

He was freed in December 1950, and returned to Munich, where he died, not as the American Fuehrer, but as a sick and broken man, on December 14, 1951. Perhaps a statement made by Kuhn himself to the Munich police president and reported by the *New York Times* best sums up the American Fuehrer’s legacy. He is reported to have said, “Who would have known it would end like this?”¹⁹¹

Research conducted by the *New York Times*, as well as the Justice Department and the U.S. Congressional investigation of the German American Bund published in 1940 disclosed that once Fritz Kuhn was imprisoned for tax evasion and embezzlement, the Bund went into a rapid decline, both in membership numbers and in financial contributions. Within weeks of Kuhn’s imprisonment, the new Bundesfuehrer, G. Wilhelm Kunze, took steps to consolidate his power. After leading the movement to depose Kuhn and expel him from the organization, Kunze sent out orders to local leaders that threatened expulsion for any member who deviated from the new leader’s

¹⁸⁸ *The New York Times*, July 25, 1947.

¹⁸⁹ *HQ European Command Incoming Message*, Ref. #F-782, February 4, 1948.

¹⁹⁰ *The New York Times*, April 13, 1948.

¹⁹¹ *The New York Times*, June 17, 1948.

policies.

Whereas Kuhn had become identified as the symbol of the Bund, Kunze was looked upon by the membership as an opportunist who took advantage of Kuhn's misfortune and betrayed him in order to usurp power. From the moment he took office, Kunze had problems convincing the membership to fall in line: "He never won the respect and obedience of the membership and many refused to recognize Kunze as national leader."¹⁹²

By July 1940, income-producing activities had decreased substantially. The U.S. congressional report issued in 1940 shows that the Bund's AV Publishing Company, which had printed tens of thousands of pamphlets and leaflets under Kuhn, as well as the *Weckruf*, had but \$18.95 in its account. In the 1937-1938 period, the publishing company showed a net income of \$36,905.60. and a net profit of \$1,112.82. The DKV (Deutscher Konsum Verband) during this same period, showed an income of \$63,343.08 and a net profit of \$2,083.12. Under Kunze, the DKV account amounted to \$87.76.¹⁹³

Kunze had made a decision that harkened back to the days of Teutonia, when the membership spent most of its time at social gatherings, and political activities were mostly confined to the gatherings themselves. It is apparent that Kunze's desire to cut back on Bund fund-raising activities, rallies, and publications was due to a number of factors, including government harassment, the refusal of those still loyal to Kuhn to participate in Bund functions, and a general malaise in the ranks of the membership.

¹⁹² Justice Department, "*Outline of Evidence against the German-American Bund*" (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, 1942).

¹⁹³ U.S Congress, *The German American Bund*, 77 Congress, October 3,1940, 1830.

Kunze was unable to “whip the troops into a frenzy”¹⁹⁴ as his predecessor had been able to do. “This situation, amounting to a crisis in confidence, resulted in a weakening of the Bund’s cohesiveness. There was constant dissent, and many rallied around Mrs. Kuhn to show support for her husband.”¹⁹⁵ Kunze’s appeal for a united Bund fell mostly on deaf ears. Whereas hundreds attended Kuhn’s annual conventions, only 38 delegates appeared at the Chicago convention in 1940.¹⁹⁶

These developments support the thesis that Fritz Kuhn’s skills were the necessary prerequisite to keeping the organization strong and viable. American organizational Nazism and anti-Semitism would not have flourished during the years it did without Kuhn’s specific contributions. After Kuhn was gone, the organization began to self-destruct. No longer was there a leader who had the ability to appeal to the “cause” by virtue of skill or force of personality.

A review of the sources utilized for this thesis convey bits and pieces of Kuhn’s skills in holding the Bund together, enlarging it, and making it the relatively successful organization it was, worrying both American citizens and government officials that it might indeed become a Fifth Column. None of these works, whether it be primary sources, such as the congressional investigations, the newspapers e.g. *The New York Times*, FBI documents et al. appeared to arrive at the conclusion that Fritz Kuhn was the key to the continuing success of the Bund. By the same token, the secondary sources consulted (e.g. Bell, Miller, Canedy, Diamond et al.) wrote of Kuhn as a cog in a wheel, and approached the subject of the German American Bund chronologically as this work

¹⁹⁴ Carlson, *Undercover*, 147.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter*, September 18, 1940.

has, but did not focus on Kuhn and his leadership skills, which led to the height of the Bund's success, culminating in the Madison Square Garden rally of February 20, 1939.

Under the stewardship of Fritz Kuhn, the German American Bund had reached out to a disenchanted German American community, and although the majority of that community did not become members of the Bund, enough did to cause great concern within the American government and to the American public at large. The post-Kuhn organization became little more than a social club. Kunze did attempt one last time to enervate the movement during his end of the year speech in 1940, but it was to no avail.

Whereas Kuhn had a gift similar to Hitler's, the ability to excite his followers and have them follow his orders without question, Kunze had no such ability. Despite the investigations that took place in 1938 and 1939, Kuhn had maintained order and discipline within the organization, and always managed to convince the members that in the end, all would turn out fine. Unfortunately for Kunze, his two years of leadership resulted in a mass exodus of Bund members who did not want to be caught in the ever-widening government dragnet against the Bund. Kunze, realizing the end was near, fled to Mexico in early November, 1941. A month later, Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese. The executive committee of the German American Bund immediately voted to disband the organization.

Kuhn lived out his final years in obscurity in Germany after years of imprisonment. American officials, so concerned about Kuhn's impact upon American society during the 1930s were not even aware of his death when he passed away in 1951.

CONCLUSION

Between 1924 and 1941, an organization existed within the United States, its stated goals a reflection of the ever-changing political and financial situation in both in the United States and in Germany. The height of its success and influence occurred under the leadership of Fritz Julius Kuhn between 1936 and 1939. Neither before nor after Fritz Kuhn's tenure did the organization attain the relative success it achieved during the period of time Kuhn was the Bundesfuehrer. Measuring this success in terms of membership numbers, financial solvency and the impact that the Bund had on the American psyche, it is clear that Kuhn's skills in business, marketing, and organizational planning not only contributed to the Bund's momentum, but was a prerequisite for attaining that success.

Not only through his proven skills but also by force of personality, Kuhn took a moribund group that by all rights should have disbanded following Germany's edict of 1935, and transformed this group into, as many government officials saw it, a potential "Fifth Column." His innovations, particularly the children's camps, the mass rallies, and the several incorporated businesses intended to cater to the Bund membership, created a unified organization that had never existed under Kuhn's predecessors, and had ceased to exist under Kuhn's successor. Kuhn's utilization of the "Fuehrer Principle" left no doubt as to whom was in charge, and coupled with Kuhn's "cult of personality," the German American Bund remained solidified under the Bundesfuehrer.

Having its genesis with the so-called aim of advancing German language and culture in the U.S., the National-Socialist-influenced Free Society of Teutonia had as its underlying raison d'être the marketing of the Nazi party, still in its infancy, to German malcontents who had come from Germany immediately after the First World War.

Underlying the stated aims of Teutonia was the ever-present spectre of anti-Semitism. To all those Germans who were left with nothing but the clothes on their backs after the war, the explanation for their circumstances was simple. It was the Jews who had undermined the German war effort and created the current dilemma in which the German immigrants now found themselves.

Despite Teutonia's attempts at infiltrating the German American consciousness, the leaders of the organization attracted very little attention and a relatively small following of only about 500 members. The leaders of Teutonia were simply unable to make the political or social connections necessary to enlarge the organization. Both Fritz Gissibl and Peter Gissibl lacked the skills necessary to build upon the already-established nucleus of the movement. Although handbills and pamphlets were published, as well as a German-language newspaper, neither of the Gissibl brothers was able to capitalize on the modest marketing effort. Although Teutonia did not impact the American psyche in any meaningful way, it did serve as the training ground for the future leaders of the new groups that would rise from the Free Society of Teutonia.

A more hardened group emerged from the remnants of Teutonia in 1933, energized by the effects of the Depression on the American population. This recycled organization, the Friends of New Germany, was led in turn by Fritz Gissibl, Heinz Spanknoebel, and then again by Gissibl. The Friends took on a more ominous

appearance, one that mimicked the German Nazi Party, which had taken power in Germany that same year. A fighting force called the Ordnungs-Dienst (O-D), modeled on Hitler's S.S., was created to keep breakaway organizations who refused to join the Friends, in line.

Although both Gissibl and Spanknoebel went further to strengthen the organization's ties and marketing to the German national community than had been done with Teutonia, they were beset with problems that forced Spanknoebel to emigrate back to Germany within five months of taking over the leadership of the Friends and Gissibl to do the same by the end of 1935.

In 1934, the House of Representatives convened a committee to examine Nazi propaganda and its utilization by the Friends. The McCormack-Dickstein Commission (as it was known) did indeed find documented evidence of German subversion that contributed to the strengthening of Nazi organizations within the U.S., but there was no outcry from the American public. Gissibl, showing the same lack of motivation and drive that he exhibited while leading Teutonia, neglected to use the public's laissez-faire attitude to the Friends' benefit. Rather than market the organization to the German American public, he continued to focus his membership drives on the German National population. This became a problem when, in November 1935, the NSDAP declared that all German nationals were forbidden to join or to remain members of the Friends. This was due to the reports being received in Germany that members of the Friends were acting like thugs, instigating fights, and generally bringing about a negative association with the Nazi government. At this time, Hitler still had hopes that a

relationship could be created between Germany and the U.S., and did not want that possibility destroyed by the Friends' antics.

With Germany's edict in force, Fritz Gissibl saw no further purpose in continuing to lead the Friends of New Germany, whose ranks had been decimated by the edict. Having appointed his successor and leaving him to his own devices, Gissibl departed for Germany in December 1935, having overseen the near demise of the Friends of New Germany.

The new leader of the Friends, Fritz Kuhn, quickly took charge of the situation, incorporating new ideas for marketing the organization, expanding the membership roles, and involving "his" organization in the political arena. Kuhn's first move was to attempt to give the impression that it was ridding itself of its association with the German nationals. True, many German nationals had left the organization, but there were those who remained. Unlike Gissibl, who saw no future in his group's existence once the NSDAP edict had been announced, Kuhn approached the problem in a different manner. Rather than depend on the German national community, Kuhn decided to expand membership to the German American community. In concert with that decision, he changed the name of the Friends of New Germany to the German American Bund, with its connotation of Americanism, in March 1936.

Any success garnered by the German American Bund, particularly in the halcyon years of 1936 to 1938, must be viewed in a relative manner. Relative to its predecessors, the German American Bund was indeed a more successful organization as it related to membership numbers, finances, media attention, and the fear it engendered from both the American government and the American public. Kuhn's ability to create a

vivid association between the Communist threat and the Jewish threat was another drawing card for potential Bund members, who were anti-Communist as well as wildly anti-Semitic.

Kuhn perceived the German American Bund as a self-contained entity, and as such, incorporated divisions that would cater to the membership, an innovation not considered by any of the previous leaders. Part of the attractiveness of Bund membership was the fact that on a social and a needs basis, the Bund truly did care for its members and for their families. In the process of utilizing the services created by Kuhn's businesses, the membership increased the Bund's coffers significantly.

Kuhn's role as Bundesfuehrer was also enhanced by his so-called "intimacy" with Adolf Hitler. Although there was no truth to his statements that he was indeed an intimate of Hitler's, Kuhn used his trip to the 1936 Olympics to create the fiction that his leadership of the Bund had been sanctioned by Hitler himself. This produced a greater sense of loyalty among current Bund members, and brought others who were affiliated with other Nazi cells in America under Kuhn's circle of influence. He also widened associations with other anti-Semitic organizations such as Pelley's Silver Shirts and Father Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, whose members joined together with the Bund during the latter's rallies during the late 1930's.

Had Fritz Kuhn not taken over the leadership of the Friends in early 1936, all indications are that the remnants of the organization would have remained fragmented, with no one leader showing a proven ability to bring together a disparate groups of anti-Semites under one "administration." Certainly, Gissibl had not shown the leadership

necessary to reconstitute the Friends into a more powerful organization, and once Kunze had taken over the reigns of leadership after Kuhn was imprisoned, the Bund went into a steep decline in membership numbers and financial stability. The potential for the German American Bund to remain a threat to America had been undermined by the departure of Kuhn. Kunze pulled back significantly the amounts of literature published by the Bund, stopped the rallies that had been a hallmark of Kuhn's tenure, and ceased any involvement in the American political arena. From 1939 through the end of 1941 and the immediate demise of the German American Bund following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bund found itself hearkening back to the days of Teutonia. No longer a threat, and with a weak leader at its helm, the Bund became no more than an anti-Semitic social club, a shadow of its former self. With Fritz Kuhn gone, everything that had made the Bund the relative success it had been under the leadership of Fritz Kuhn went with him. Kuhn's famous quote on his own downfall serves well as an epitaph of the German American Bund: "Who would have known it would end like this?"

Several of the secondary works utilized in the development of this thesis have become standards among the works dedicated to tracking the growth and destruction of the Bund. Among the most important are Leland V. Bell's *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism*, Sander A. Diamond's *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941*, and Susan Canedy's *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma*. These and other works have dealt in depth with the history of the American Nazi movement, but none have approached the subject by attempting to show that the most successful era in that seventeen year period, namely 1936-1939, was as the direct result

of the skills utilized by Fritz Julius Kuhn.

In Bell's short chronological work, he recognizes that the Bund was at its most successful during the 1937-1938 period, but he does not attempt to correlate that success with Fritz Kuhn's approach to building the Bund. In fact, he misstates the time period that the Bund reached its zenith when, in his introduction, he writes that "the Bund reached its high point of power in the mid-1930's."¹⁹⁷ He also writes, "it was erroneously assumed that the Bund received direct orders from Hitler, that it embraced a membership of half a million and that it was preparing a violent overthrow of the government."¹⁹⁸

When Bell uses the phrase "erroneously assumed," he is going to the heart of the matter that this thesis has attempted to prove, which is that all of these assumptions were a product of Kuhn's genius in the marketing of the German American Bund. Whether it was through guile, deceit, or simply force of personality, Fritz Kuhn was able to portray the Bund in a way that had not been feasible with either his predecessors or his successor.

Diamond's work, masterful in its retelling of the Bund story, still manages to give Fritz Kuhn short shrift. Diamond writes, "Although Kuhn, Hitler's imitator in America, never attracted more than twenty-five thousand followers to the German American Bund. . ."¹⁹⁹ Given the fact that Teutonia never exceeded about five hundred

¹⁹⁷ Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Port Washington, NY: Kenikat Press, 1973), 3.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974), 21.

members and the Friends of New Germany had between six and eight thousand members, Kuhn's ability to attract up to twenty-five thousand members in the heart of "Jewish America" is somewhat astounding. In a reality in which the Bund movement was rejected by Hitler, and several government investigations were proceeding during the 1936-1939 period, it is ultimately Kuhn who deserves the credit for keeping the organization from "dying on the vine."

Diamond, in his introduction, makes it clear that he will be working from a chronological standpoint: "In general, recent studies of the Bund have emphasized the group's chronological development and its relationship with Germany. . . this book, which uses the chronological approach."²⁰⁰ Kuhn plays a major role, as he should, but Diamond, as with Bell, does not attempt to show that Kuhn's efforts were paramount towards creating the environment necessary for the Bund to thrive in ways it had not prior to after the advent of Kuhn as Bundesfuehrer.

Canedy's work is a study of the German American Bund as it relates to cultural isolationism within a society and the problems that can result from those who do not consider themselves part of the mainstream, as undoubtedly was the case with a certain percentage of Bund members. Her work does focus on the Kuhn/Kunze years. She does recognize Kuhn's value to the movement when she writes that "the Bund had lost all vitality with Kuhn's incarceration."²⁰¹ Indeed, she goes further in attesting to Kuhn's influence in creating a successful movement: "The German American Bund was created and sustained by Fritz Julius Kuhn and not by the German government."²⁰² That being

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 31.

²⁰¹ Canedy, *America's Nazis, A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park CA.,1990), 220.

²⁰² Ibid., 223-224.

the case, Canedy does not go far enough in presenting the proposition that but for Fritz Kuhn, the Bund would not have attained the success on several fronts that it ultimately achieved.

Ultimately, this thesis has provided a study on the development of the German American Bund, and has, unlike previous published works, made the case that through the marketing skills, business acumen, and personality of Fritz Kuhn, the German American Bund attained a success it would not have achieved and would have disintegrated into small, ineffective cells as had been shown to exist prior to 1936 and during the 1940-1941 following the departure of Kuhn.

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