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Philip Jenkins. *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925-1950.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xi + 255 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2316-3.

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Fluent Patriots

Author James Carroll in a recent interview described his father as a "fluent patriot." So, also, are the many subjects of Philip Jenkins' book. Whether Klansmen, Silver Shirters, German-American Bundists, Italian Blackshirters, Christian Fronters, or those who spoke more ephemeral and local dialects, patriotism was the core of their credo and their mother tongue. It may sound odd to describe vehemently and vociferously and occasionally violently antigovernment types as "patriots." Many were admirers of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco who Heiled Hitler while wearing swastikas, cheered the invasion of Ethiopia, disparaged democracy of particularly the New Deal variety, and made and maintained close contacts with foreign governments and intelligence services.

Yet they did so in the name of preventing a multiform and fatal takeover of the United States by a left that they felt not only preached international subversion and sedition but was beginning to practice them here. American civilization was at stake: the home, the family, the school, and traditional political and legal practices were all endangered. International bankers, Jews in general, communists, laborites and their tools in the Roosevelt administration and in the judiciary and media were behind it all and had to be fought and stopped. Only "Christians," "Nationalists," and "True Americans" could do the job but they used those labels in specific ways. By them they meant the forces opposed to the perceived international conspiracy to destroy America by undermining individual freedom and compromising American moral and social coherence. By the end of the 1930s even Catholics and blacks, once the targets of far right venom, could be enlisted as auxiliaries, especially as the right became more extreme and more anti-Jewish. And fascism, in their minds, rather than being a foreign ideology with antidemocratic and anticapitalist implications could be viewed as an expression of "true Americanism."

The resurgence of the political right in recent decades and consciousness of the extreme right's shadowy world especially since Waco, Ruby Ridge and Oklahoma City makes Jenkins' work most timely. A publicity notice included with the book calls attention to the fact: "Hate Radio and Extremist Groups Not New" it proclaims in a bold headline. Jenkins includes some summary comparative thoughts on the extreme right now versus the extreme right at its previous peak in the 1930s. It was far more active and effective in the 1930s because modern groups generate far fewer numbers, and because societal disapproval is the climate in which they must now operate. This is borne out by the experience of my own community. In 1991 a highly publicized Klan rally drew only thirty-forty spectators despite heavy and elaborate police protection. Meanwhile, across town an anti-Klan counterrally that drew some 3,000 was virtually ignored by outside media but undoubtedly helped convince the Klan they would be better off elsewhere.

It is worth underscoring that "the earlier movements could plausibly claim a degree of sympathy in the bystanders of a particular area ..." (p. 231) and that "modern sensitivity about public expressions of racist or extremist views ..." (p. 231) prevents the kind of success enjoyed in the 1930s. Another big difference is the explicitly religious emphasis of much of the contemporary right. Jenkins describes it as "perhaps the most important shift in the rightist tradition in the last half century" (p. 233).

Even though this is true, Jenkins sees some ideological continuities with the earlier groups right up through the 1996 presidential election in the Buchanan candidacy. "Key political themes of these years included such long-familiar topics as immigration, internationalism, and a far-reaching perception that governments are seeking to modify or corrupt traditional values or social structures. The perceived subversion of public education retains a central role in conservative rhetoric" (p. 232). He sees some continuity between contemporary anti-Satanic literature and earlier nativist attacks on Catholics, Masons,

and Jews. Criticisms of and resentment against New Agers, the media, and Left-Liberal secularism also echo earlier themes.

As fascinating and timely as those observations may be (and as potentially open to challenge) they form but a very small part of Jenkins' purpose. His book is a case study of the extreme right in Pennsylvania chiefly in the 1930s with some attention to earlier groups in the 1920s as they contributed to the making of the "Brown Scare" by the end of the depression decade. It is both his conviction and "main conclusion" (p. 236) that "a great deal still remains to be known about the ultra-right in these years, and that gaps can only be filled by local and regional studies" (p. 236). Jenkins' study is a model of how to go about this.

In Jenkins' rendering, the far right in Pennsylvania coalesced in the 1930s for reasons that are mostly very familiar. Profound political change coupled with real economic fears and dislocations of the decade provided fertile soil for the growth of extremism, and groups bloomed in profusion. The Pennsylvania right was both bigger and more diverse than heretofore known. Although it is very difficult to get precise numbers, Jenkins argues persuasively that it was likely at least as numerous as the far left. In certain localities and specific urban neighborhoods the right was a significant force. Local factors such as ethnic or racial concentrations and periodic outbreaks of industrial conflict shaped possibilities, as did attitudes and approaches of local business leaders and law enforcement and political officials.

Despite the fact that there were so many groups with such surprising numbers, little has been known about them. Media coverage was distorted and media criticism blunted by a number of considerations. Moreover, far right activities outside New York City have received very little attention relatively speaking, and New York groups and leaders have been assumed to be typical and nationally significant. Outsiders seldom took notice of far right groups' activities because of their secretiveness and because their actions met with far greater general approval than now. In many ways the distance between the far right and the conservative mainstream was a much shorter one then. When they did come to public notice it was typically either through congressional investigations that were followed by media and public scrutiny or by impressively large rallies and gatherings.

What little was known about them often originated with their political enemies. Exposes done by the left had little impact or currency outside the political and social circles of the left. Their critiques often were self-limiting because they usually focused only on the more sensational and extreme pronouncements and actions of the far right. But they did contribute to the perception of a "Brown Scare" by the end of the decade that helped unify disparate elements of the left and provided a much needed political windfall for the Roosevelt administration in discrediting isolationism. Jenkins concludes there never was much substance to the fears of a nationwide, coordinated right wing threat in the 1930s. But there were two important waves of activity in Pennsylvania from 1932-1934 and from 1938-1941.

While the groups studied may have differed somewhat from continental fascism in one respect or another, they nonetheless really did constitute an antidemocratic and anticapitalist potential threat. Moreover they truly did represent a radical challenge to U.S. institutions even as they proclaimed loyal Americanism. "There never were a million fifth columnists, but there were dozens of extremist groups on the Far Right, forming an interlocking network that looked to the same core of leaders and theorists and that shared common facilities for the manufacture and dissemination of propaganda. While the terminology is controversial, at least some of these movements can legitimately be described as Nazi or fascist" (pp. 5-6).

Extremist groups flourished in Pennsylvania between the start of the New Deal and U.S. entry into World War II. Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had active branches of the German American Bund, the Silver Shirts, the KKK, the Italian Blackshirts, and the Christian Front. These branches sometimes provided national leadership and nearly always represented nationally significant numbers, money, and support. Philadelphia was probably second only to New York City as a center of extreme right activity. Pennsylvania's secondary cities and counties like Reading, Lancaster, Wilkes-Barre, and Erie, and counties surrounding both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, were strongholds. Jenkins does an excellent job of delineating the geography of far right strength.

The Ku Klux Klan at its peak by the mid-1920s was centered in the coal and steel regions around Pittsburgh and the hard coal region surrounding Wilkes-Barre in northeastern Pennsylvania. It counted perhaps a quarter million Pennsylvania supporters who could be found in virtually all counties of the state. Chiefly nativist in the 1920s, it experienced precipitous decline and then revival in the late 1930s, its reinvigoration due to antiunion, antilabor, anticommunist, and anti-Semitic emphases.

Though not nearly as well known as the KKK, Italian-American fascist groups appeared and flourished at the

same time as the better-known hooded organization. Pennsylvania's very large Italian-American population often lived in tightly knit urban enclaves. Admiration for Mussolini's political, administrative, and foreign policy triumphs gave them a nationalistic pride, and fraternal organizations, particularly the Sons of Italy, provided an organizational base. Prominent judges, politicians, and community and Catholic church figures supplied effective leadership, while the Italian-language press contributed the communication channels. Within the Italian enclaves there was broad community support and approval: "[f]ascism had become commonplace, unremarkable ..." (p. 101) by the mid-1930s. Despite the preponderance of Italian influences, the movement remained loyally Democratic if not democratic and for that and other reasons enjoyed unbroken success unknown to the Klan and other far right groups. It also largely escaped the media and government scrutiny that other groups endured.

Hitler was the inspiration for further developments. Although the Silver Shirts were more active elsewhere, their anti-Semitic emphasis found some support in the Keystone state. Hitler's anti-Semitism and Jewish harassment and eventual persecution found a receptive audience in areas of Pennsylvania where there were large concentrations of Jews and where their business success made them visible and widely resented. Aided by Pennsylvania congressman Louis McFadden, the connections among Zionist plots and plans and New Deal initiatives and labor activism were made clear. Philadelphia had a local and briefly successful anti-Semitic organization called the Khaki Shirts in the mid-1930s. But Pennsylvania's chief contribution to the cause was another homegrown organization, the Anti-Communism Society founded and dominated by Bessie Burchett and "upper-crust ultrapatriots characterized by a contemporary pamphleteer as 'Dress Shirts"' (p. 127). They regarded "Jew and Communist as synonymous" (p. 130), and New Dealers and labor organizations such as the CIO as virtually synonymous with the others.

German-American nationalism, especially potent by the mid-1930s, was the additional crucial element in the organizational successes of the German-American Bund. Pennsylvania's major and secondary cities had large German-American populations, and not surprisingly also had significant Bund activity. In Jenkins' view Philadelphia, in particular, was a center of national importance. Centered in the same areas of the city where the Klan had flourished in the 1920s, the Bund thrived due to pre-existing German-American cultural societies which supplied a membership and organizational base and fed German-American admiration for Nazism. Bundists used Nazi titles, Nazi organizational strategies, and even Nazi-inspired paramilitary dress, training, and protocol. Like the earlier Italian groups, Bundists maintained strong connections with the German government and the Nazi Party.

The Bund and other earlier far right groups contributed to the Christian Front which "built successfully on older and widely accepted ideologies" (p. 165). While the Bund was strongest in German areas of North Philadelphia and the Fascists in Italian sections of South Philadelphia, the Christian Front was most formidable in predominantly Irish West Philadelphia. While Jenkins views it as a "gross oversimplification to see the Coughlinite movements as simply 'Irish fascism,' there were definite analogies between the components of the Christian Front and the better-known groups that directly modeled themselves on European examples" (p. 166). Events in both Spain and Ireland supplied the chief inspiration to this group. The Spanish Civil War was crucial in determining its anticommunism and in connecting the Spanish Nationalist cause with the cause of Christ. Traditional Irish-American anti-British animosity pushed the Christian Fronters to extreme isolationist positions. By the late 1930s, Fr. Charles Coughlin had moved to join anti-Semitism to a general anti-leftism and bitter opposition to the New Deal and its increasingly interventionist tendencies that made the Christian Front a congenial ally for a number of other far right groups. Coughlin's radio broadcasts enjoyed wide popularity in the City of Brotherly Love and the Michigan priest was a frequent speaker there. The Christian Fronters, acting as a sort of *de facto* extremist umbrella organization triggered the fears of a fascist fifth column.

Jenkins' book is an excellent study. It is a carefully researched, cogently argued model case-study approach. Philadelphia gets the bulk of the attention but other areas of the state are covered when appropriate. What emerges from the close focus on the southeastern Pennsylvania right is a much fuller picture of the groups and leaders and ideologies and organizational strategies. Also, connections between and among groups are carefully documented and analyzed, revealing the complexity and symbiotic relationships that characterized them and the ideological continuities between the 1920s and 1930s. Some understanding of how the far right in Pennsylvania differed from and was the same as the extreme right elsewhere emerges also, although Jenkins will be the first to argue that much more local and regional research needs to be done before details of the larger picture can be clearly seen.

What is clear from Jenkins' study is that the far right in Pennsylvania in its heyday was a potentially potent and diverse phenomenon. It drew its strength chiefly from ordinary individuals who found its dogmas and doings attractive not because, for the most part at least, they were socially pathological, but because they provided plausible explanations of profoundly disorienting developments in both the United States and the world at large. Despite the luridly distorted graphics the publisher has chosen to adorn the dust jacket and the chapter openers, the unstated (at least explicitly) but unmistakable conclusion of Jenkins' work is the ordinariness of the Pennsylvania far right.

Clearly more interdependent than previously understood, these groups often acted in concert or at least shared meeting facilities, leaders, and ideas. Even more importantly they shared a countersubversive mentality that coalesced by the late 1930s into a convincing picture of a fearful threat. Though many of the groups disappeared or shrank drastically after U.S. entry into W.W. II their agenda lived on in the virulent anti-communism of the postwar Red Scare. Minus the prewar anti-Semitism "so many of its [the extreme right's] basic assumptions became political orthodoxy after 1946" (p. 237). Jenkins even speculates that had the Roosevelt administration either admitted massive Jewish refugees to the United States or moved faster and more decisively than it did toward participation in W.W. II the possibility of converting mass numbers of Americans to the countersubversive mentality cannot be ruled out.

Though confined to Pennsylvania and primarily to Philadelphia, Jenkins' work has much that ethnic, labor, political, and social historians should pay attention to, and it should be consulted by all interested in the Roosevelt administration and in foreign policy of the 1930s. It is an important book and a first-rate piece of historical research.

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