

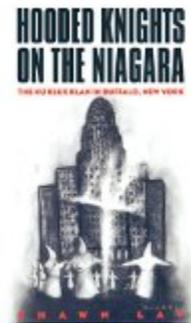
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Shawn Lay. *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York*. New York: New York University Press, 1995. xiv + 198 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-5102-2; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5101-5.

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Published on H-Ethnic (April, 1996)



Shawn Lay offers in *Hooded Knights on the Niagara* a finely detailed and judicious account of the membership, activities, and defeat of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Buffalo, New York, then the eleventh largest city in the nation. Lay's book joins a long list of revisionist studies of the second Klan, which place primary analytical emphasis not on the Klan's racist ideology and rhetoric, but on its social and political contexts. Lay's study is distinguished by being the only one to treat the Klan in a major northeastern city, as well as by rich sources, including membership lists and undercover reports on the Klan's secret meetings. In Buffalo, the Klan never enjoyed broad enough support to be called "populist," as it has been by Leonard Moore [1]. Lay prefers to characterize the Buffalo Klan as a "civic action group" whose legitimacy was denied by its opponents. The story of its defeat, of the "powerful constraints that limited Klan growth and influence in the urban Northeast," is as important as the analysis of the Klan's membership and activities (pp. 2, 7).

City politics played the crucial role in both shaping and destroying the Klan in Buffalo. In 1921 Francis Xavier Schwab, a German-Austrian active in Catholic lay groups, a brewery salesman (and later manager and president of the company), nominally a Republican but opposed to Prohibition, won a narrow election over an incumbent progressive Protestant mayor in a campaign notable for its ethnic and religious cleavages. As mayor, Schwab alienated the Protestant minority of the city. Opposition to Schwab's lax enforcement of Prohibition and vice laws intersected with more generalized social concerns about the roles and behavior of women and youth, the loss of spiritual purpose, class and ethnic divisions, and a perceived crime wave.

Klan recruiters had appeared in Buffalo before Schwab's election, but they had met determined resistance. The local African American newspaper stated the militant opposition of the black community to their presence, as did the Catholic newspaper. The major newspapers were less vehement in their denunciation of the Klan, but they greeted its appearance with derision and contempt, making it clear that they did not welcome the organization. The previous city administration had said little about Klan recruiting, but the Schwab administration used every means at its disposal to confront it. Schwab promised to dismiss any city employee who joined the Klan, although he had no legal authority to do so.

He could do little more, because, despite their depiction as "irrational bigots and hooded terrorists" (p. 51) by the press and city leaders, Klan recruiters remained resolutely law-abiding, thereby drawing closer to local evangelical activists and reformers opposed to the Schwab administration's social policies. The Klan's opponents gained a major weapon when the state legislature, fearful of the potential political challenge to the status quo the Klan represented, passed the Walker Law, which required the Klan (without explicitly naming it) to file with the state lists of its members, officers, and all political resolutions and minutes.

As a secret organization the Klan was thus illegal, but that may have heightened its appeal as an instrument of defiance and dissent in largely non-Protestant and non-Anglo-Saxon Buffalo. At open-air meetings in the summer and fall of 1923, the Klan's "lack of social acceptance and its outlaw status . . . mandated particularly stringent standards of solidarity, discipline, and dedication

that enhanced a sense of mission missing in mainstream fraternal groups. Although outsiders ridiculed almost every aspect of the hooded order, Klansmen remained confident that they were pursuing noble ends, that each knight represented another soldier in a crucial struggle to reorder and revitalize the community and nation" (p. 65). As Protestant ministers and reformers perceived a worsening of conditions and abandoned hope of persuading the Schwab administration to change its policies, the Klan increasingly seemed to be emerging as a legitimate political force. Non-violent visitations to roadhouses and saloons gave it some credence as a civic action group. When nine masked members in full regalia confronted Schwab himself at a public meeting, the enraged mayor resolved to crush the organization.

Lay is able, at this point of confrontation, to provide an insightful portrait of the Klan and its meetings based on analysis of membership lists and of informants' reports to Schwab. Bigotry pervaded Klan members' attitudes toward all ethnic and racial groups, but Roman Catholics, particularly the largely Irish Knights of Columbus and Mayor Schwab, bore their major animus. Politics, not religion, was the chief item of discussion at meetings, although politics and religion often were intertwined. The reports to Schwab contained little to link violent, or even extralegal, actions to the Klan or its members. To Lay, the reports on the Klan's meetings show that characterization of the KKK as aberrant or lawless is simply wrong. Its members' religious and racial bigotry differed little from common attitudes of the time, and, other than maintaining its secrecy (in violation of the Walker Law), it engaged in no illegal activities.

Klan members' social backgrounds showed their respectability as well. By occupation, they were a remarkably high-status group. Many were small businessmen and benefited from fellow members' patronage. Skilled blue-collar workers were represented in large numbers; few factory workers or unskilled laborers joined. Lay found little evidence that economic dislocation or job competition between ethnic or racial groups influenced membership directly. By residence, Klan members were more likely to live in newer, more prosperous, outlying sections of the city. Ethnic divisions among white Protestants did not inhibit Klan recruiting; indeed, German-American Protestants provided a rich source of members. Available data on denominational affiliation also indicates that the Klan had broad appeal among Protestants. By age, Klan members were younger than the average adult. More than three-fourths were under 40; typically, members were young family men involved with estab-

lishing careers and businesses and concerned about local social problems, particularly those related to the city's lax enforcement of vice and Prohibition laws.

In the summer of 1924 opponents of the Klan launched an "all-out war" (p. 115) on it. The Schwab administration took an increasingly militant stance. Schwab fired a pro-Klan school teacher; more important, his administration took advantage of the burglary of Klan headquarters to expose and discredit individual members. A set of index cards containing Klan members' names put on public display threw the Klan into disarray by removing the secrecy of its membership. Anti-Klan activity became common. Klan businessmen and tradesmen reported monetary losses; one member shot himself and his family.

Schwab pushed his advantage: he announced that he had another, more detailed list, and offered to let individual members retrieve cards containing their names, but refused to return the cards to the Klan itself. When the police chief balked at further public display, because of fears of disorder, Schwab ordered him to open the lists to newspapers and pursued a court order to allow full public access. By then the list had been published, and another round of anti-Klan activity initiated. In this context, a shoot-out involving an undercover informer and a Klan investigator sent from its Atlanta headquarters added to the tension.

When forty-one subpoenas were issued for potential prosecution under the terms of the Walker Act, members could no longer hope to maintain the secrecy of their affiliation with the Klan. It quickly collapsed as an active political force. The following year Schwab easily won reelection over an opposition candidate who echoed many of the concerns that had been raised by the Klan. Thus, in Buffalo, the Klan's activities did little more than discredit the cause of moral reform.

A concluding historiographical essay helps to locate the arguments offered here in a larger context. Lay's work complements other recent studies of the Klan quite well, with one exception, Nancy MacLean's *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*. MacLean offers innovative readings of Klan rhetoric and ideology, particularly on gender issues. Although she places the Klan squarely within the populist tradition, MacLean explicitly parts from "the trend in recent historical writing about the Klan to de-emphasize the racial hatred of its politics and the violence of its practice," and, moreover, stresses the reactionary aspects of its populism [2].

*Hooded Knights on the Niagara* would have been better served if Lay had confronted MacLean's challenge to Klan revisionism more directly. He does so only obliquely in the Introduction, where, stating his own distaste for the racial and religious bigotry associated with the Klan, he adds that "the presentation of a prolonged and emotional denunciation of the Klan . . . would have been both self-indulgent and counterproductive" (p. 8). He is undoubtedly right, and should be commended for judicious and restrained commentary.

But the interpretative restraint that Lay exercises may slight his larger points. The final inconsequentiality of the Klan in Buffalo should not be taken to undercut its significance there or in other northeastern cities. Greater attention might have been paid to a social and political analysis of the Klan's opponents, for it was they who won, and it was their predominance that distinguished the experience of the Klan in Buffalo and other northeastern cities from that of middle-western and western cities that have been the subjects of earlier revisionist studies. Finally, Buffalo, as a long-settled eastern city, might have offered an opportunity to assess the 1920s Klan as part

of a spectrum of "nativist" (primarily anti-Catholic) moments in the history of a particular community, including Know-Nothings in the 1850s and the American Protective Association in the 1880s and 1890s, but Lay chose not to do so.

#### Notes

[1] Leonard Moore, "Historical Interpretations of the 1920's Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1990): 341-57; and *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[2] Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. xiii. See reviews of MacLean by Lay, *Reviews in American History* 22 (1994): 668-73, and Moore, *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 320-21.

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**Citation:** Robert J. Kolesar. Review of Lay, Shawn, *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

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