

**Bradley W. Hart.** *Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018. 296 pp. Illustrations. \$28.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-250-14895-7.

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Bradley W. Hart's *Hitler's American Friends* makes a convincing case that during the period from Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in Germany until the US intervention in World War II, groups sympathetic to Nazism attracted much more support among Americans than most scholars acknowledge. Hart focuses on three of the most important of these groups—the German American Bund, the Silver Legion, and the Christian Front—that promoted a virulent anti-semitism almost indistinguishable from that of the Nazis. Hart emphasizes the groups' broad geographical reach across the country. They drew significant support from two of the nation's largest ethnic groups, German Americans (especially the Bund) and Irish Americans (the Christian Front). The Silver Legion's backing came largely from Protestants, the Christian Front's from Catholics.

Hart also devotes considerable attention to the America First Committee (AFC), the nation's leading isolationist organization in the years prior to American entry into World War II, whose estimated membership of eight hundred thousand was easily the highest of the groups he discusses. Primarily a conservative isolationist organization, the AFC included some liberal and socialist pacifists and many militant antisemites. The AFC was particularly dangerous to the security of European and American Jewry because it lobbied ag-

gressively against US military and economic support for Britain when it stood alone against Nazi Germany's war machine, which by the end of June 1940 had overrun most of non-Soviet Europe. In addition, Hart's work examines how the Hitler government developed relationships with members of the US Congress and congressional staff, and with American university administrators and some faculty members, to present a favorable image of the Third Reich in the United States and even to conduct espionage.

The book begins with one of the most famous antisemitic speeches given in the United States until that time, delivered by aviator hero Charles Lindbergh, the AFC's "most popular circuit speaker" (p. 2), in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 11, 1941. The speech was broadcast on radio across the country to a sizeable mainstream audience. The nation's press gave it considerable attention the next day. Lindbergh accused the Jews of using their "large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government" to push the United States into a disastrous war. He warned darkly of a pogromist backlash if the United States entered the European conflict: the Jews "will be among the first to feel its consequences" (p. 2). Hart quotes New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia's characterization of

Lindbergh's statements as "a carbon copy of a Nazi paper" (p. 3).

The book includes a chapter on US citizen and pro-Hitler propagandist George Sylvester Viereck, whom Hart identifies as the Nazi government's "single most important source of US political intelligence" (p. 98). Viereck had been a paid propagandist for the German government during World War I, both before and after US entry, and had backed Hitler since 1923. Shortly after Hitler assumed power in 1933, Viereck began working with the German Tourist Information Office to encourage Americans to vacation in Nazi Germany. This effort was designed to provide the Hitler government with much-needed foreign exchange and expose the visitors to Nazi propaganda. Viereck's most important accomplishment was developing relationships with members of the US Congress and their staffs that allowed him to obtain inside, and sometimes very sensitive, information about congressional discussions of affairs of concern to the Hitler government. Viereck developed particularly strong contacts with isolationist senators Ernest Lundeen and Burton Wheeler and with Representative Hamilton Fish. Viereck had German officials arrange for, and fund, the distribution to the American public of massive numbers of copies of isolationist and anti-British speeches by members of Congress. The German embassy in Washington, DC, also financed Viereck's purchase of Flanders Hall, a book company that he transformed into Nazi Germany's major publishing house in the United States.

Hart should have provided more context in this chapter by discussing open expressions of antisemitism on the floors of Congress. David S. Wyman in his *The Abandonment of the Jews* (1984) quoted US Representative John Rankin's denunciation of Jewish journalist Walter Winchell, who repeatedly condemned antisemitism and the Third Reich in his column, as "that little kike." Leonard Dinnerstein in his *Antisemitism in America* (1994) reported that US Representative John

Flannagan declared on the House floor that "he did not want 'any Ginsberg' to lead his son in battle." [1]

The book devotes attention to the economic assistance many leading American corporations provided Nazi Germany by establishing subsidiaries there. These corporations, some of which had already invested considerable funds in Germany before Hitler came to power, included Coca Cola, IBM, Woolworth's, Ford, and General Motors, which had taken over the German automobile manufacturer Opel in 1929. These corporations violated the boycott of German goods and services, well underway in the United States by the fall of 1933, thereby economically strengthening Nazi Germany as it was rapidly rearming.

Hart details the significant assistance some of these corporations provided the German military. He notes that Opel trucks "became the German army's favorite form of mechanized transportation" (p. 123). Opel also provided parts for Luftwaffe bombers deployed in the Battle of Britain. Henry Ford, America's most famous antisemite and AFC member, opened a plant in Cologne, which supplied Hitler's army with military vehicles that it used in occupying Czechoslovakia. Edsel Ford decided to continue production at the company's factory in France after its surrender in 1940. Hart points out that American corporations with plants in the Third Reich had a "vested interest" in preventing US intervention in a European war, "especially with the Royal Air Force starting to bomb German factories that might soon include their own" (p. 130).

In a chapter entitled "Students," Hart supports the argument I made in *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower* (2009) that American institutions of higher learning helped to legitimize the Third Reich by forging friendly ties with German universities, despite the Nazification of their curriculum, the discharge of Jewish faculty, and the sharp limitation on Jewish enrollment. For example, university administrators warmly welcomed

high-level Nazi Party and government officials who came to their campuses to present Hitler's case. American colleges and universities hosted German exchange students that the Hitler government had trained as Nazi propagandists, while sending American students to the Third Reich, where they were subjected to Nazi indoctrination. American exchange students often became advocates for the Hitler regime upon their return to this country. The chapter also devotes attention to the Paul Reveres, allegedly engaged in espionage for Nazi Germany at colleges and universities, and to American fascist propagandist Lawrence Dennis, who received many "high-profile" campus speaking invitations (p. 159). The Hitler government provided some funding to Dennis through George Viereck.

The book's first two chapters provide useful overviews of the virulently antisemitic German American Bund and Silver Legion, respectively; the third, on "The Religious Right," is devoted mainly to Charles Coughlin and the Christian Front. The third chapter also includes some discussion of the rabidly antisemitic ministers Gerald Winrod and Gerald L. K. Smith, who after World War II became arguably America's most prominent antisemite before Louis Farrakhan. Hart shows how German Nazi ideology strongly influenced all of these groups and individuals. But he largely overlooks how the Christian Front's viciously antisemitic propaganda inspired savage violence against Jews, escalating in the late 1930s, and peaking in what were called at the time "small pogroms." [2]

The Bund, which evolved out of the Friends of the New Germany (1933-36), was founded in 1936, modeled on the Nazi storm troopers, and composed largely of first- and second-generation German Americans. Even though the Bund's strong German American identity limited its appeal to other ethnic groups, it still benefited from a sizeable German immigration precipitated by the collapse of the German economy in the years imme-

diately following World War I. The Bund established a network of camps to indoctrinate German American youths in Nazi ideology and to instill a martial outlook in boys. Hart does not discuss the Friends of the New Germany's and Bund's aggressive, often violently enforced boycott of Jewish-owned shops in New York City's heavily German American Yorkville section. The Bund terrorized and physically attacked Yorkville Jews and ruined many Jewish businesses.[3] Yet, strangely, Hart mistakenly claims at one point that the Bund was not "openly antisemitic" (p. 66), even as he presents evidence elsewhere contradicting this. Closely associated with Nazi Germany, the Bund was unable to survive US entry into World War II.

The similarly pro-Nazi Silver Legion, headed by William Dudley Pelley, was about the same size as the Bund—fifteen thousand to the Bund's twenty thousand, by Hart's estimate of their peak membership, with each having an additional hundred thousand sympathizers (p. 239). The Silver Legion identified as Christian, and its locals had chaplains. It had a paramilitary branch, the Silver Rangers, whose "weapon of choice was a scourge whip based on the one Jesus had supposedly used to drive money changers from the temple in the Gospels" (p. 55), an image antisemites frequently used to contrast Christians' "spirituality" with Jews' alleged materialism. The Silver Legion claimed that the Jews controlled the United States by dominating its financial, industrial, and communications systems, and its leading politicians.

Hart could have drawn a parallel between Silver Legion chieftain Pelley and contemporary antisemitic leader Louis Farrakhan, both of whom embraced bizarre conspiracy theories about Jews' vast power and demonic intent and had delusions of being in communication with divine beings or spirits. Farrakhan claimed that he had been transported in a beam of light to a massive spacecraft called the "Mother Wheel," where the deceased Nation of Islam (NOI) leader Elijah Muhammad, whom the NOI regarded as a prophet, spoke to

him and predicted the future.[4] Pelley declared that Jesus had forecast to him Hitler's coming to power. This was the sign that Pelley was to establish a "Christian Militia" to rescue the United States from the Jews. Jesus had again contacted Pelley to endorse his creation of the Silver Shirts.

Like the Bund, the Silver Shirts were unable to survive US entry into World War II. Both groups suffered from incompetent leadership, which included financial mismanagement. Pelley also charged President Franklin Roosevelt in several articles with "tempt[ing] the Japanese into war," and he called Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor "divine justice punishment" (p. 65). This led the US government to have Pelley arrested on sedition charges.

The Christian Front was the most influential—and violent—American antisemitic, fascist group to emerge during the 1930s. Members were inspired by the rants of the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, whose radio audience "was the largest in the world" (p. 70). In 1940, Coughlin's newspaper *Social Justice*, sold in front of many Catholic churches, enjoyed a circulation surpassing two hundred thousand. Hart drops any substantive discussion of the Christian Front after Coughlin's withdrawal from political activity in 1942 as a result of pressure from his archbishop and the US government. In fact, the Christian Front remained a force defaming and precipitating violence against Jews not only through World War II, but for a decade after the war's end.[5]

Hart opens the chapter on the "Religious Right" by discussing Coughlin's defense of Hitler's policies against Germany's Jews in his radio broadcast after the November 1938 Kristallnacht nationwide pogrom. He also cites Coughlin's claim in the speech that Jewish bankers had financed the Bolshevik Revolution. Hart could have highlighted many more of Coughlin's venomous antisemitic slanders and libels, indistinguishable from those of the Nazis. These included his charge that the Talmud contained immoral precepts

threatening to "every civilized society." [6] He gives only passing attention to Coughlin's promotion of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most pernicious pieces of antisemitic propaganda ever concocted.

The chapter should have included a discussion of the Christian Front's anti-Jewish terrorism, which began in the late 1930s and continued during World War II, when Jews of all ages and both sexes in Boston and New York City were repeatedly subjected to brutal beatings. These attacks, which left many Jews seriously injured and some disfigured, was inspired by the massive outpouring of Christian Front propaganda circulating in those cities. The propaganda also led to serious damage to many Jewish-owned stores and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries. In addition, it contributed to the spread of defeatist sentiment during World War II, particularly pronounced in Boston.[7]

These criticisms aside, Hart is to be commended for drawing attention to the extent of antisemitic agitation in the United States during a critically important period. This subject has received far too little scholarly attention. In recent decades virulently antisemitic neofascist groups, such as the Nation of Islam and Christian Identity, both of which have roots in the 1930s, have become a significant danger in the United States. A greater understanding of the American Far Right and its history is essential.

#### Notes

[1]. David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: New Press, 2007 [1984]), 14; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 136.

[2]. Stephen H. Norwood, "Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II," *American Jewish History* 91 (June 2003): 233–67.

[3]. Stephen H. Norwood, “Antisemitic Terror, Defeatism, and Anti-Zionism: Coughlinism and the Christian Front, 1934-1955” in *From Antisemitism to Anti-Zionism: The Past & Present of a Lethal Ideology*, ed. Eunice G. Pollack (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 127.

[4]. Eunice G. Pollack, *Racializing Anti-semitism: Black Militants, Jews, and Israel, 1950-Present* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2013), 30–31.

[5]. Norwood, “Antisemitic Terror,” 113–47.

[6]. Ibid., 122.

[7]. Norwood, “Marauding Youth and the Christian Front,” 233–67; Stephen H. Norwood, “American Anti-Semitism during World War II,” in *A Companion to World War II*, ed. Thomas Zeiler (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 909–25.

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