

Jack Nelson. *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign against the Jews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. 287 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87805-907-2.

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Terror and Entrapment

In very readable fashion, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jack Nelson recounts the 1960s Ku Klux Klan campaign against the Jews in Mississippi and exposes an FBI ambush that resulted in a woman's death and the capture of a bomb-planting terrorist. Expanding on a 1970 front page *Los Angeles Times* article entitled, "Police Arrange Trap: Klan Terror Is Target," Nelson writes an engrossing account of events leading to the shootout and elaborates on the personalities involved. Like a skilled novelist he provides character sketches of rabbis, police detectives, Klansmen and Klanswomen, informants, and government officials that capture a reader's attention. The second part of the book attempts to heighten the sense of reality with an exhaustive explanation of Nelson's motives, sources, and a rundown of where the key players of this true life drama are today. The aim of the book is to describe the KKK's shift of attention from the Black community in the South to the Jewish community and then to charge the FBI with entrapment. And, further, he claims that funds raised by the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith (ADL) for the specific purpose of hiring informants to solve the case actually were used instead to finance a deadly ambush.

According to Nelson, Southern Jews were for the most part assimilated and indistinguishable from their segregationist neighbors. While "roughly 50 percent of all the [civil rights] demonstrators and about 70 percent of the lawyers who represented them" were Northern Jews, Southern Jews were primarily interested in keeping a low profile. Nelson states that the influx of Jewish activists from the North "made it much harder for Southern Jews to remain inconspicuous" (p. 43). Rabbi Perry Nussbaum of Temple Beth Israel in Jackson wrestled with his own conscience in balancing his support for civil rights and the very real concerns of his congregation about Klan retaliation. The concerns were justified. Both the synagogue and Rabbi Nussbaum's home were bombed by the Klan after he began actively supporting civil rights for

Blacks.

The vocal outrage of the general population after the bombings of Jewish targets was swift, and Nelson insists repeatedly that hundreds of Black churches had already been bombed by the Klan without evoking this sort of sympathy. But when the Klan began going after the (white) Jewish community, apparently that was something different. This element of the story is disturbing and suggests that law enforcement and government agencies began making progress against Klan activity only after the Jewish community was targeted. Following the bombings the ADL publicly called for a swift investigation and apprehension of the criminals. Funds were raised by the Jewish community, and the FBI and local law enforcement joined forces in an effort to close the case and end the bombings. This is what the public saw and approved. But what happened behind the scenes, Nelson asserts, is that the FBI used illegal tactics to set up an ambush with the intention of executing the Klan members on the spot.

FBI informants played a crucial role not only in ascertaining the identities of those responsible for the Mississippi bombings, but in convincing them to target a Jewish businessman's home for the next hit and thereby entrapping them. Nelson claims that payoffs and physical threats were used to coerce the informants, and the account he gives is spine chilling and convincing. Even the participants in these events who later disapproved of Nelson's revelations admit that desperate times called for desperate measures and that the only way FBI and local law enforcement could deal effectively with the Klan was by using the toughest means (p. 235). Informants were not given a choice of cooperating with the FBI; their lives were threatened if they refused. Nelson neither downplays this nor exaggerates. He methodically shows his readers that coercion played a pivotal role in breaking the Klan stronghold in the South.

Ironically, the man responsible for planting the

bombs that terrorized the Jewish community in Mississippi becomes a key character in Nelson's story. Thomas Albert Tarrants III was a young man obsessed with the cult of hate that fed the KKK and a cold-blooded killer. According to Nelson he was not expected to walk away from the ambush. The FBI and local police expected Tarrants and another Klansman to arrive on the scene heavily armed, a justifiable pretext to shoot to kill. But to their dismay Tarrants arrived with a young woman, Kathryn Madlyn Ainsworth, a respected elementary school teacher *and* a radical KKK member, with never the two mixing. Nelson suggests that her presence so discombobulated the men waiting that the ambush was compromised but not abandoned. Ainsworth was killed on the spot and Tarrants was badly wounded. He survived, however, and was eventually tried, convicted, and sentenced to thirty years in prison.

After a botched escape attempt, Tarrants was confined to strict quarters, making a second escape attempt virtually impossible. After years of imprisonment he became a born-again Christian and today enjoys a quiet life with his wife and children. Nelson spends the last part of his book detailing the transformed life of this ex-Klansman who went on to write his own book about

his Klan involvement and subsequent change of heart and life. Although this is laudable, it leaves a disturbing sense of who really was victimized. Although Nelson gives absolutely no indication that he sympathizes with Klan activity in any way, and while we can guess that he finds the KKK's philosophy of hate as repugnant as it truly is, he fails to provide a sufficiently sympathetic account of the true victims. Readers are left with the picture of a repentant Tarrants wanting to visit and apologize to the congregation whose synagogue he bombed and their stony refusal to allow him. Nelson leaves us with a terse ADL statement (p. 241) denying that law enforcement agencies used any but legal methods to capture Klan members in Mississippi. And both Rabbi Nussbaum (who died in 1987) and the ADL representative who traveled to Mississippi after the bombings are portrayed as broken, bitter men. Nelson's book is riveting and thoroughly documented. But the question that haunts is who, after all, were the victims here?

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