

The Anti-Nazi Demonstrations

Some of us will never forget that Feb. 20 of 1939, the day of the largest anti-Nazi demonstration in American history.

In mid-afternoon, a few of us who had helped to organize that demonstration began to patrol Madison Square Garden, where the German-American Bund (American Nazi Party) was to have its rally. Small groups appeared, passing each other silently, waiting for the demonstration to coalesce. An unnatural silence blanketed that crisp New York afternoon.

The police materialized, almost as silently, two thousand of them, including the largest mounted force ever mobilized. Before the crowds arrived, they swept the streets, pushing us back until they had established a two-block cordon sanitaire around the Garden. Block after block, a solid high wall of horses stood between us and the Nazi rally. By meeting time, a large sector of Manhattan was packed with people, tens of thousands upon tens of thousands, pressing against the police lines, crying, swearing, shouting slogans, insensately furious at the spectacle of the Nazis holding their monster rally in the very center of world Jewry's largest population.



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Alleys of access had been established, through which participants were escorted, but some of them did make it unscathed. Hour after hour the massive demonstration roared on. Speakers were occasionally hoisted up in the various blocks to address the crowds. But this was not — could not possibly be — a neatly staged affair. Those of us in front were helplessly pressed between the masses of angry, frightened people — and the lines of frightened, rearing horses mounted by grim and frightened policemen. There were some bloody altercations.

This was the largest demonstration of its kind. But there had been others. In New York, Nazi meetings were regularly demonstrated against and attacked. There had just been a pitched battle between the Nazis and members of the American Legion. In San Francisco, on May 30, 1938, Herman Schwinn, the leader of the Western Nazi "Gau" presided over a Pacific Coast Bund convention. A thousand Bundists and Silver Shirts held sessions inside California Hall while outside 3,000 anti-Nazis demonstrated.

A history and assessment of the American Nazi Party has just been published by a professor of history, Leland Bell, in a book entitled "In Hitler's Shadow." He takes note of the Madison Square Nazi rally and anti-Nazi demonstration: "A survey of nationwide editorial opinion revealed a unanimous condemnation (of the Nazi rally), but also a general belief that to ban the meeting would have violated fundamental American civil liberties. Many editors made an excellent point by commenting that the best way to combat American Nazism was to give it freedom to display its vulgar exhibitions."

In any case, the Nazi Party never made serious headway in the United States. At its height, around 1938, it had about 8,500 members and 5,500 sympathizers. German aliens comprised about 25 per-

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cent of this total; the majority of the total were naturalized Americans who had fought for Germany in World War I. But the Bund failed to get substantial support from German-American citizens. Indeed, one of the most bitter enemies of the Nazi Bund was the Steuben Society, the largest and most prestigious association of German-Americans.

The Bund also failed to get financial support. At the time, some of us suspected secret corporate backers, as in the case of Germany. It never happened. In its best year, the Bund had a gross income of about \$100,000 from all literature sales, subscriptions, membership dues, admissions, sales of pins and so forth—and ended up with a bank balance of about \$1,000.

The fact is that no one (including the Nazi Germany government) was going to back a loser. And the American Nazi Party was always a loser. There was always the real danger that an extremist, Anti-Semitic movement (such as Father Caughlin's) could become influential in America. But that danger did not come from a movement based on such an explicitly foreign ideology and warped in a swastika. By the same token, the demonstrations in this country were directed more towards Nazi Germany than towards the American Nazi Bund itself.