



# Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund

*Arnie Bernstein*

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## **Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund** Arnie Bernstein

In the late 1930s, the German–American Bund, led by its popinjay dictator Fritz Kuhn, was a small but powerful national movement, determined to conquer the United States government with a fascist dictatorship. They met in private social halls and beer garden backrooms, gathered at private resorts and public rallies, developed their own version of the SS and Hitler Youth, published a national newspaper and—for a brief moment of their own imagined glory—seemed poised to make an impact on American politics.

But while the American Nazi leadership dreamed of their Swastika Nation, an amalgamation of politicians, a rising legal star, an ego-charged newspaper columnist, and denizens of the criminal underworld utilized their respective means and muscle to bring down the movement and its dreams of a United Reich States.

*Swastika Nation* by Arnie Bernstein is a story of bad guys, good guys, and a few guys who fell somewhere in-between. The rise and fall of Fritz Kuhn and his German-American Bund at the hands of these disparate fighters is a sometimes funny, sometimes harrowing, and always compelling story from start to finish.

## **Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund** **Details**

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# **From Reader Review Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund for online ebook**

## **Harvey Solomon says**

The author has certainly done his research, yet Swastika Nation lacks a compelling storyline beyond its just-the-facts approach. It often feels like a compendium of a rally here, a rally there.

First-hand accounts, from either the major players or rank and file, might have led to a deeper, more nuanced look at the bund. How did members feel, for example, when it all disappeared overnight in the wake of Pearl Harbor?

The most glaring omission is the lack of any photos (other than the cover) or graphics of pamphlets, posters, anything. Including visuals would have helped enliven a rather dry read.

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## **Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says**

Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund by Arnie Bernstein is a non-fiction book detailing the rise and fall of the American Nazi movement before World War II. This is another forgotten chapter in history, and even though we'd like to forget it, it seems wiser not to.

Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund by Arnie Bernstein is a disturbing, scary but very readable history book. The book starts with a 1939 pro-Nazi rally held in Madison Square Garden bringing in tens of thousands of supporters – an even which today is difficult to fathom.

Mr. Bernstein focuses on one man, Fritz Julius Kuhn, a native German who moves to the US, gets a job for a known industrialist anti-Semite (Henry Ford) joins the German Bund and diligently gets to the top, to the position of Bundesführer. Eventually Kuhn is brought down by Fiorello La Guardia, Thomas Dewey, and others when they had had enough of his shenanigans.

The Bund finds many supporters of National Socialism (and the “Jewish Problem”) but many high profile opponents as well. My favorite chapter had to do with the Jewish gangsters (Meyer Lansky, Longy Zwillman, Bugsy Siegel among others) who, while not religious and sometimes even a cause of shame for their communities, took it upon themselves to protect “their people” – and even enjoyed it as well.

The author does not hide his disdain from the subject of the book, a bunch of ugly people doing ugly things. The book is a fascinating chapter in American history showing how a fringe group can take the ideals this nation was founded on and manipulate them for their own purposes. Stupid people are dangerous in large groups and Mr. Bernstein proves it on every page.

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## **Seth J. Vogelmann says**

I was fairly disappointed in this book. It began with a bang and then was anticipating some illuminating information on this topic. Mr. Bernstein quickly detoured and filled the book with obtuse references to popular culture, a too in-depth review of Jewish gangsters and other filler, while not really ever focusing on the German-American Bund.

The position of the Nazis as a reflection of US culture would have been good, as well as a better overview of German-American sentiments in light of overall US isolationism and other related trends up until 7 December 1941. There is an excellent study of Germans, Jews, Italians and Irish in pre-WW II NYC (can't remember the name now) that would have complemented the subject.

It was a sad end to what should have been a great book. If my student had handed in this paper, the red pen would have had a field day!

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### **Jemma says**

Pretty poor. The first clue is that there are no pictures, save the cover. This would've been interesting and help to put the various people, events and locations in context. Secondly, there is not really much to tell because all the things you expect from Nazis are here - anti-Semitism; gangster behaviour; racism; ill-considered positions. The main difference from the German variety is that these Nazis are unsuccessful. Indeed, in this work at least, they seem to get beaten up more than they actually attack anyone else - you almost feel sorry for them.

Essentially, this is two good essays with a lot of waffle sandwiched in between to pad it out to book length. At one point it becomes a book about the Jewish Mafia, which is relevant but clearly of more interest to the author and presented uncritically. As histories of the Mafia often are but the gloss is applied rather too thickly here.

Lastly, there is a lack of deeper research. The Nazis appear to want to have little to do with their American cousins, which is odd but consistent with their cool approach to other potential allies. Sadly, there is no attempt to research the German archives to find out why. Later on, Henry Ford meets the disgraced Bundesführer en route to prison but this appears only as an anecdote, with no further research into the peculiar circumstances of this meeting.

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### **Michael Ritchie says**

History of the German-American Bund, a group of German-American social clubs which endorsed the idea of Nazi ideology in American politics before WWII. An interesting topic I've not read much on. This book is a good starting place, but much of it is simply the re-wording and re-telling of many newspaper articles of the era. The author did his research, but then spends too many paragraphs, especially near the end as he writes about Kuhn's trail on charges of embezzlement, relating all the court exchanges, whether relevant or not. It's about 100 pages too long. His middle section, on American Jews (mostly gangsters) who fought against the Bund (whom he calls "golems") feels like it belongs in a different book.

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## **Anthony Faber says**

Interesting book, telling of the rise and fall of the Bund, with an assorted cast of characters. I was surprised by the number of Jewish gangsters that got involved in extra-legal harassment of the Bund, and I feel just the slightest bit guilty about it.

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## **Ralphz says**

Fascinating look at the rise and fall of the American Nazi movement German-American Bund in the 1930s and 40s.

The movement centered on a megalomaniac, Fritz Kuhn, a German-born American citizen who admired Hitler and pursued the creation of a Nazi America. The stunning thing about this is that he had many on his side - including Henry Ford.

The group's antisemitism was a factor that attracted many to the cause. So was the idea of "Aryan" purity and German nationalism.

The book also is about out those that dared to challenge him - many of whom were Jewish newspaper columnists, such as Walter Winchell, and Jewish criminals, such as Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel. Their involvement in bringing the movement down was a surprising angle.

I took off one star for one simple reason: the repetitive use of the title in every chapter. Fritz Kuhn sought to establish his Swastika Nation, we're reminded again and again. Look, I get that Bernstein likes his title, but why does he have to say that as though Kuhn really was seeking to establish something called "Swastika Nation"? It's annoying.

Otherwise, a good book about a forgotten chapter of American history.

More reviews at my WordPress site, [Ralphsbooks](#).

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## **Deb Novack says**

Swastika Nation is the story of the German American Bund and its leader Fritz Kuhn in pre World War II times. Kuhn was a trained chemist and also a thief, he stole money from the Bund treasury to keep his many mistresses, he was eventually tried and imprisoned in Sing Sing for embezzlement. He had once worked for Henry Ford who was known as an anti-Semitic.

The historical research and storyline were wonderful and the characters although sleazy were written with great care.

Thanks to Net Galley and St. Martins for allowing me to read this in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Robert says**

Overall, the book is very informative. One criticism I have is that there were too many chapters. About 50% fewer would have been more manageable.

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## **James Garner says**

Gripping narrative about Nazi apologists at work in America during the 1930s. Bernstein is a great writer and researcher. This peek into a sordid corner of Americana gives a real taste of the era. I especially enjoyed the story of Jewish gangsters Mayer Lansky and Mickey Cohen and their efforts to interrupt the American Bund from spreading their message.

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## **Jacqueline says**

An interesting if slightly dry read about a pro Nazi group in America before and during World War II. as I live near the former Bund I was excited to read about Kuhn and his group. The research is well done and the pictures complement the story well, but I didn't really feel the concern of the surrounding neighbors or the government. If you are a history nerd who loves anything World War II related then you might like this book. Be warned though it is not an easy story to read.

\*I received this book as a digital ARC from NetGalley but the opinions in the review are my own.\*

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## **jordan says**

Arnie Bernstein offers an interesting, if overblown and at times overwrought, examination of the Nazi German-American Bund with his work "Swastika Nation." The book is quite thorough, especially with regards to its discussion of Fritz Kuhn, a central casting figure if ever there was one.

The central issue with the book is Bernstein's glossing over just how tiny the Bund was in the years America's entry into WWII (Spoiler alert: already weakened by law suits and infighting, the Bund dissolved shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack). Yes Bernstein offers the conflicting membership numbers 200,000 according to Kuhn, 20,000 according to the FBI -- but he then quickly moves on lest someone realize the Bund's ineffectiveness and relative irrelevance. As a political movement the Bund never approached the relatively broader appeal of Britain's Union of Fascists; where Mosley's group at its height could point to proud public members, The German American Bund never successfully moved beyond a small fraction of America's German citizenry and certainly never gained the height of radio priest Charles Coughlin. Where Coughlin at one point might have scored somewhere in the single digits had he run for President, Kuhn likely wouldn't have even gotten beyond an asterisks.

The most interesting thing about the Bund is not its absurd program, but rather the degree to which it stood in as a target for frustrated Americans who were interested in opposing Hitler (and politicians wishing to score points with Americans). Bernstein considers some of this, but he seems too vested in making the Bund seem threatening rather than comical to explore it fully. Still, his discussion of Jewish leaders and Jewish mobsters

targeting Kuhn's Bund makes for an interesting read. This topic is also given interesting consideration in Michael Chabon's novel, "Kavalier & Clay."

In the end, the German American Bund is barely more than a footnote in the rowdy politics of 1930s America. Bernstein does good work out thin material, but one should remember that the Bund was mostly irrelevant (just for perspective, "The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League" could boast some 6,000 members). This will certainly remain a significant work for those interested in exploring this narrow topic.

A free copy of this book was supplied by NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Valerie says**

What some of the other reviewers are saying....why did the German-Americans join this group as opposed to the other German-American organizations that were out there at the time? This was never fully explained.

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## **Jeff Francis says**

Arnie Bernstein's 2013 "Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German Bund" achieves an especially impressive feat: prescience. I.e., although the book is now five years old, and portrays events from some 80 years ago, it has become *more* relevant since its publication.

Within the past year, groups of white supremacists and self-identified Nazis attempted to take over an American town, in the process murdering a woman and injuring many others. In the wake of those shocking events, many people were surprised to learn that the events somewhat had a precedent... Enter "Swastika Nation."

It's almost impossible to read SN now and not think of the last couple years, but even separately from that it's still a good book. Bernstein turns in a gossipy historical narrative and all-around wild ride, with a cast of characters including Walter Winchell, Henry Ford, Jack Ruby and Bugsy Siegel.

Bernstein also presents a linear account of a German immigrant rogue who came to America and tried desperately to establish an offshoot of the Third Reich. Although mostly ignored and disowned by the real Reich, Kuhn pulled an impressive number of members into his Bund, establishing encampments and holding rallies, which culminated in the infamous 1939 Madison Square Garden rally.

Violence was common. Kuhn and the Bund established a thuggish parallel to the SA/SS. However, protestors fought back, including a contingent of Jewish gangsters (the mafia vs. the Nazis!). But, as is often the case, the real downfall came from the courtroom.

Let it be known that "Swastika Nation" is far from an objective account (as if such a thing were even possible, given the material), and there were many times I wished the book had pictures. However, it's still a book that's both relevant and historically educational... and surprisingly entertaining.

As someone who's a fan of the book and show "The Man in the High Castle," I've been pondering the accidents of fate that resulted in the history we live vs. the ones that could've been. This concept was driven

home in “Swastika Nation” when Fritz Kuhn, imprisoned after World War II, is asked by a jailer how he felt about making such a terrible mistake as trying to serve Hitler.

Replied Kuhn, “Who would have known that it would end like this?” (p. 283)

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## **Charlie Oliver says**

I have mixed feelings about this book--as a historical work that shows the impact and danger presented by the German American Bund, a group of anti-Semites that venerated Hitler and wanted something similar to happen in America, this book is deeply flawed. The stakes are never really established--why did Fritz Kuhn appeal to people? Was the threat ever anything beyond some racist idiots who exercised their freedom of speech and believed some deeply awful things? How did this American group's attempt to embrace Nazi ideals sit with the average family? Did it appeal to them or no?

Ultimately, I think the reason there hasn't been much work on the subject of Kuhn and his ill-fated group of fools is because it's not very interesting and it was (seemingly) a fairly small group. Compare the height of the German American Bund's popularity--a rally at Madison Square Garden--with the KKK's march on Washington about a decade prior. Kuhn's group drew about 22,000 whereas the KKK drew about four million. To me, the most interesting parts of the story--how does a good government preserve freedom of speech while also discouraging people from being awful to each other--were glossed over. What, ultimately, was more effective--the guys who went out and kicked Nazi butt or the politicians who limited their ability to spread hate speech through legislation? No doubt when Bernstein wrote the book he had no idea it would become so relevant to current events, but here we are and I want to know (historically) what was the best deterrent. At the end of the day we know this--these American Nazis didn't have any real success and didn't really amount to much more than a bunch of hate speech and racial camps--but are the laws that ended up closing those camps and limiting their ability to give anti-Semitic speeches still on the books? I need some big picture analysis here, not just long accounts of Fritz Kuhn's racist life and trial.

To bolster the narrative and punch it up a bit, Bernstein occasionally turns to celebrities to show the impact of the Bund on them. You end up with some implied support from Henry Ford (very plausible) and Walt Disney (less likely). What's more, we get to hear about Jewish New York mobsters sending out their guys to work some racists over and while, that's super fun to read about, we never get much of a big picture there either. Did these physical attacks on Nazis fear any fruit? Disrupt them beyond a temporary setback? How frequent exactly were these dust-ups?

The book drags when we hit the trial of Fritz Kuhn because it's painfully obvious by that point that he's guilty of loyalty to another government and committing financial indiscretions against his own party but this portion of the book is told in GREAT DETAIL. Spoilers: he was guilty & got sent back to the Fatherland only to run afoul of the denazification programs there. While I mention it, that denazification stuff sounded interesting but we received about an eighth of the detail about that compared to the trial.

A good book and an interesting book but forgettable and skippable.

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