Nazis in New York:
The German American Bund & WWI
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Abstract

This project focuses on the relationship between the German American Bund and the anti-German hysteria of WWI. Formed in 1936 the Bund was an American organization that claimed to be devoted to upholding the Constitution while at the same time fostering German American relations. Yet, it quickly proved itself to be a blatantly pro-Nazi group. In the years before WWII, the Bund attempted to garner German-American support. While the Bund represents the interaction of a number of international and national factors: the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the Great Depression and latent anti-Jewish Sentiment in America of particular significance to this paper is the relation between anti-German sentiment of WWI and the later conduct and outward message of the Bund in the pre-war years. As this project will argue, the Bund was in part a response to the anti-German sentiment of WWI. In addition this paper will explore how the Bund attempted to appeal to the American public, as well as trying to cull support amongst German-Americans.
Nazis in New York

Formed in 1936 the German American Bund was an American based Nazi group that tried to bill itself as an organization devoted to fostering relations between Germany and America while at the same time upholding American laws. Yet in its speeches and writings, the Bund proved itself to be blatantly fascist and anti-Semitic. In the years before WWII the Bund tried to appease an increasingly harsh American public while attempting to garner German-American support. While the Bund represents the intersection of a number of factors, both national and international, of particular significance for this paper is the relation between anti-German sentiment of WWI and the later conduct and outward message of the Bund in the pre-war years. As this project will argue, the Bund was in part a response to the anti-German sentiment of WWI, its actions reflecting this earlier hysteria. In addition this paper will explore how the Bund attempted to appeal to the American public by professing its devotion to American culture, as well as trying to cull support amongst German-Americans, through the employment of “Deutschum” or Germanness, the theory that blood transcended nationality.

Studying the Bund is useful for a few reasons. From a research perspective while much is already known about the Bund, (its operations, its hierarchy, its activities) the connection to WWI hysteria is not so thoroughly explored. Instead, current literature has been effective in examining the relationship between the Bund and the Nazi Party in Germany, and how this relationship affected the public perception of the former entity. The following research seeks to instead place the Bund temporally, not only in a history of WWI German hysteria, but also a history of German immigration into the U.S. The connection to WWI only becomes salient when viewing it in the larger context of German immigration and understanding the particular
significance of what it meant to be a German immigrant in the 19th and 20th centuries. From this angle, this project represents a new method of interpretation.

Additionally, the Bund raises a number of introspective and potentially disturbing questions about the nature of pre-WWII American society. Indeed, just the fact that the Bund existed and was allowed to pursue its activities with relative freedom already challenges and dismantles the view of American society being united against the evils of fascism and Nazism. Further issues include immigration to the U.S., the idea of “good immigrants”, the rise of National Socialism in Germany, international relations between Germany and the U.S. and latent anti-Semitism and racism in the United States. Especially on the issues of immigration and racism it is important to consider the fact that despite increasing public criticism against the Bund, not much official action is taken against them. There are no dramatic raids of Bund offices, nor are supposed Bund members rounded up. When the Bund does dissolve in 1941, it is one of their own accord. Nor is there much action taken against the German-American community. Aside from FBI monitoring of suspicious individuals, and the uncovering of spy rings and, the community is left largely un-accosted.

This freedom of action is startling when compared to the swift response against completely innocent Japanese Americans in the wake of Pearl Harbor, despite the fact that the Bund constituted a, arguably, more serious threat to the American public, than a handful of second generation Nisei. Although both entities roused considerable amounts of 5th column fear. It is in this fear of enemy infiltration and difference of reactions on the basis of race that the significance of the Bund has the potential to expand past historical context and into the contemporary world especially in the aftermath of 9/11. The demonization of the Arab and Muslim community as a result of the actions of a few extremists stands in sharp contrast to the
relative tranquility with which German-Americans were treated. And although the Bund committed nothing nearly as heinous as the attacks on the Twin Towers, issues of race still remain relevant. The German-Americans, had by the time of WWII integrated themselves fully into American society and the intertwining of these two cultures meant that it was difficult to distinguish between who/what was “American” and who/what was “German.” Like the Japanese-Americans, more recent Arab-Americans are not afforded the luxury of this great historical precedent, and as such were and are able to be more easily separated from the “norm.” Thus, the Bund and its issues of race and immigration are not just relegated to the past, living on well into the 21st century.

However to truly understand the Bund and its connection it is important to actually explore three areas: German immigration to the U.S., the effects of WWI on the German-American Community, and finally the actions of the Bund itself. Such a broad context may seem unnecessary, but is useful in understanding the organization. The creation of a German-American identity and community becomes relevant in WWI, as its perceived size and strength would dictate the response by the American government and public. As questions of “true patriotism” and “100% Americanism” became more prevalent, German-Americans advocated for American neutrality by referring back to their long history of immigration. The Bund would in turn use similar arguments in their work. It becomes clear that the organization only becomes salient when placing it in this larger narrative of German immigration.

The secondary source literature is effective in understanding this history. John Hawgood and Kathlein Conzen examine German immigration and German-American history in The Tragedy of German-America and Germans in America, respectively. Both of these works agree on a few essential facts. Both acknowledge that the history of Germans in America extends as far
back as 1683, with the formal settlement of thirteen families in Pennsylvania establishing Germantown.¹ By the 1850s Germans made up 35% of incoming immigrants (1.7 million out of about 6 million).² These numbers only account for incoming Germans however, those of foreign birth. By the 1880’s, 1890’s and early 1900’s foreign born Germans lived together with increasing numbers of second and third generation German-Americans. In the census of 1910, out of 92 million Americans, about eight million claimed to be of German heritage.³ Thus, in terms of chronology and sheer physical numbers there seems to be a large historical precedent and root for the presence of Germans in America.

But sheer length of time and volume still does not necessarily explain the processes by which Germans and German-Americans avoided immediate assimilation. It is in this exploration that Hawgood and Conzen begin to differ. Both agree that Germans early on were able to create ethnic enclaves in various parts of the nation (i.e. Klein Deutschland in New York). Both also agree that these enclaves were created to maintain some familiarity, and build a connection to the father-land. Germans also created enclaves in agricultural communities by choosing land that reminded them the most of home and using it differently than other settlers: working plots of land for longer periods of time.⁴ “The Yankee was the innovator and the progressive in agricultural pursuits, while the German was more conservative, working out his developments slowly and persistently,” Hawgood writes.⁵

⁴ Ibid. p. 27.
⁵ Ibid. p. 32.