

**Nazis among the Cedars: The Inability of the German American Bund to Find Acceptance  
in Pre-War Milwaukee**

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## **Abstract**

Tracing its roots back through the Friends of New Germany, the German American Bund was founded in 1936 with the express purpose of fomenting a National Socialistic revolution in the United States. The Bund had chapters formed throughout the United States, including in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where they set up Camp Hindenburg, a summer camp for youths located in nearby Grafton. Despite claims of being loyal Americans, the national Bund found itself surrounded by opposition due to public opinion, coordinated attacks, and portrayals in the media. These and other issues lead to the collapse of the Bund with the outbreak of World War II.

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## Glossary

**Camp Hindenburg:** Bund summer camp located in Grafton, WI, founded in 1937 and relocated in 1939

**Camp Carl Shurz:** Camp run by the Federation of German American Societies, located on the original location of Camp Hindenburg in Grafton, WI

**Federation of German American Societies:** Coalition of German American groups organized against the ideals of National Socialism and the German American Bund, founded in 1932

**Friends of New Germany:** Direct predecessor to the German American Bund, founded in 1933

**German American Bund:** Founded in 1936 out of the failing Friends of New Germany

**Grafton Settlement League:** Subsidiary company through which the Bund funded Camp Hindenburg

**Nationalist Society Teutonia Association:** The first National Socialistic organization in the United States, founded in Detroit in 1924

## Introduction

He [Hitler] shook hands with each of us, looked straight in our eyes and placed his hand on the shoulder of our Bund leader...He asked us about our comrades of German blood across the sea, thanked us for our strong opposition to immoral press and its infamous lies, and inquired in detail about the future plans of our Bund and our excursion through Germany... The Fuhrer thanked us for the presentation of the book of testimonials and for the accompanying donation.<sup>1</sup>

-- George Froboese on the Bund's meeting with Adolf Hitler in 1936

In the years between the World Wars when National Socialism under Adolf Hitler was transforming Germany, a dedicated group of German-American citizens and expatriated German nationals were busy trying to foment at least some of the same changes occurring overseas into the United States. The most vocal of these groups was the Amerikadeutscher Volksbund, also called the German American Volksbund, the German American Bund, or just the Bund for short. This was not the first organization to promote National Socialism as it blossomed out of the transformations of a few different predeceasing groups. Reorganized under the charismatic and divisive figure of Fritz Kuhn, the Bund experienced a few years of what can generously be described as grudging tolerance before scandal brought it to its grave and America's declaration of war against Germany provided the final nail to be hammered into an already sealed coffin.

While the above quote may make it seem like the Bund had at least the cursory support of the German government and Adolf Hitler, the truth was much different. Froboese's recollections of the Bund leaders' meeting with Hitler, housed in the Bund's annual yearbook, gives a very different meaning to the event than ever was intended by the German government. Hans Dieckhoff, who became the German Ambassador to the United States in 1937, recalled speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States: 1924-1941* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974), 255-256. Froboese recorded this reaction to the meeting in the Bund's yearbook.

with Hitler about their views on the audience with the Bund, something both men considered a mistake. Dieckhoff described a conversation he had with Hitler about this meeting, stating, “He [Hitler] had only see Kuhn once, he said, and did not wish to see him again. But that once...had caused considerable excitement since he [the Fuhrer] had been photographed with Kuhn. That, retorted Hitler, was unfortunate but hardly his fault, since it was the Olympic Games where one was photographed with all sorts of people.”<sup>2</sup> The reality of the situation turns a scene of great triumph and support into an almost embarrassing misrepresentation. This divide between propaganda and reality would see itself comfortably afforded accommodation in the rhetoric of the Bund throughout its existence.

As a national organization, the Bund’s reach included a few chapters in southeastern Wisconsin with Milwaukee becoming one of the larger chapters in the Midwestern region. Although a very German city, Milwaukee did little to welcome the Bund. When the Bund decided to open up a youth summer camp, Camp Hindenburg, in the nearby suburb of Grafton, it faced an onslaught of oppositions from everyday Americans, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the government, and even other German-Americans who organized directly against the Bund and actively attempted to thwart Camp Hindenburg. Some of these challenges promoted violence, others investigation, and all contributed an ongoing trial in the court of public opinion as well as a series of actual naturalization trials. In many ways, the Milwaukee Bund is representative of many of the larger failures that plagued the organization from the start, although it certainly had its own unique twists and turns. Ultimately, the German American Bund in Milwaukee was an organization inherently doomed to failure and it could no more find respite

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<sup>2</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 258.

under the cool cedar trees along the banks of the Milwaukee River than in any other location throughout the United States.

### **Ten Years of National Socialism**

The German American Bund did not simply rise up overnight but largely grew out of the success of German assimilation into American culture in the 1920's after recovering from a period of distrust brought against German-American immigrants during World War I.<sup>3</sup> German American immigrants had been essentially organizing since they started arriving. Before World War I one coalition, the United German Societies, boasted seventy organizations and 10,000 members in New York alone. There was, however, a difference between organizations founded before and after World War I. New arrivals that flooded organizations founded in the 1920's and 1930's did so with first hand experience of Germany's defeat and ongoing problems, changing many of their outlooks in ways that impacted the groups they joined or created. The group most directly responsible as the first predecessor to the Bund falls into this latter category. The Nationalist Socialist Teutonia Association was organized in Detroit in October of 1924 as the first National Socialistic organization in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This precursor group drew from a number of popular ideas being circulated by young German men at this time including the popular ideal that Germany had lost World War I due to treasonous Jews and Marxists. Furthermore, the Teutonians became a haven for several German expatriates who had participated in Adolf Hitler's failed 1923 Putsch and frustrated immigrants who, as the last to arrive, saw themselves being laid off by industries such as the Ford Motor Company in response

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma, A History of the German American Bund* (Menlo Park, CA: Markgraf Publications Group, 1990), XIII.

<sup>4</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 37-38.

to the onset of the Great Depression just a few years after the organization was founded. Seen by its leaders as a temporary organization simply to house these sort of frustrations for a time, Teutonia donated a portion of its monetary resources to the early Nazi Party in Germany, receiving the thanks of Adolf Hitler in 1925 and Joseph Goebbels in 1932 for these efforts. Never a terribly influential or large organization, the National Socialist Teutonia Association nevertheless established an ideological foundation from which stronger and more participatory National Socialist organizations could grow in America.<sup>5</sup>

The next influential National Socialistic organization in the United States was the Friends of New Germany. The Friends of New Germany was organized after Heinz Spanknoebel visited Germany in 1933. Portraying himself as a representative of thousands of Americans who shared his sentiments, Spanknoebel was able to talk his way into a meeting with Deputy Fuehrer Rudolf Hess and secured Hess's stamp of approval, an action which Spanknoebel interpreted to mean that he was acting under direct orders from Hitler himself. Unfortunately for those who would have liked to see such an organization succeed, Spanknoebel proved exactly the wrong man to garner public support for National Socialism. Under his leadership, the Friends of New Germany grew into a violently anti-Semitic and militant organization to the extent where it almost instantaneously exacerbated the preexisting fear that the American public had already begun to direct towards the German Nazi Party. With one of his own meetings ending in a bloody brawl, the German government calling for him to desist in his activities, and the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization moving towards his deportation, Spanknoebel fled the country within months of the foundation of this new organization. The legacy of this early blunder in public relations plagued the Bund throughout its tenure and may be one of the reasons it never

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<sup>5</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 91-98.



truly took hold in America. An example of this early distaste for National Socialism was visible in 1934 when 20,000 Americans gathered in New York to witness a mock trial of Hitler put on by the American Federation of Labor and the American Jewish Congress in *Civilization v. Hitler*.<sup>6</sup>

The Friends of New Germany was a transitional group from the more disorganized National Socialist Teutonia Association to the German American Bund. To bring German-Americans to their cause, the Friends played off the fear of Jewish control and dangerous ulterior motives like its predecessor, but expanded this mantra of intolerance to blacks as well to try and scare more to their cause, the cause of an American revitalization by the German-Americans akin to what they portrayed as happening under Hitler in Germany. In order to disseminate these ideals, the Friends of New Germany established a party press, a tactic that continued as central to the national Bund that followed. The organization also took steps to affiliate itself much more directly with the Nazi Party in Germany. To join, members were required to make two separate oaths. The first was to the organization, stating absolute support and understanding to the key tenets of the Friends of New Germany as well as declaring they were not involved in secret organizations and were of pure Aryan stock. The second was an oath directly to Hitler, promising him absolute obedience and complete fidelity.<sup>7</sup> Despite these steps, governmental and public opposition to the Friends of New Germany brought about its quick demise. Congress began an investigation of the organization shortly after Spanknoebel's flight from the country and the Dickstein-McCormack Congressional Investigatory Committee performed this investigation with widespread public support. Reporting in February of 1935, the Committee's

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<sup>6</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazi's*, 51-56.

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 142-156.

investigations had a couple of key effects that transformed the National Socialist movement in America. Initially, the Friends of New Germany responded to these accusations by ramping up its rhetoric and were able to double its membership during the investigation as radical Germans flocked to the organization in support. Despite this initial jump in membership, the release of an official government report against the Friends of New Germany caused the German government to sever whatever limited ties they had with the organization and issue an order on October 11, 1935 for all German nationals to immediately resign from the organization. This decree and subsequent publications by members of the Nazi party against the Friends more than anything forced the organization to change and grow into what would become the German American Bund.<sup>8</sup>

The German American Bund became the direct result of this period of transformation. While under public scrutiny and in the wake of Germany's official decree to quit the Friends, Fritz Kuhn was appointed by the leader of the Friends of New Germany to lead the German American Bund. At the time of his appointment, the Bund was almost solely populated by recent immigrants who were on the path to citizenship or German immigrants who had just become American citizens. Under Kuhn, the movement did not radically change in structure, yet his personality and leadership presented a much different face to the organization and transformed a passive group into an active one. Idolizing Hitler, Kuhn saw it as his destiny to unite the German people throughout America and even went so far to declare himself the American Fuhrer. Egotistical, flamboyant, and rarely seen out of uniform, his leadership set the Bund on its path towards publicity but also to ultimate failure.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 62-66.

<sup>9</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 203-205.

One important distinction that should be made is the difference in ideology behind the Bund and its predecessor, the Friends of New Germany. Although much of the rhetoric about being of pure Aryan stock, “free of Jewish or colored traces” matched the oaths taken by the Friends, Bund members did not direct their oath directly at Hitler. Instead, their oath focused on America and had new members swear to a “free America” and labeled itself as “our fighting movement of awakened Aryan Americans.”<sup>10</sup> This distinction is significant and interesting. The Bund proclaimed that it was fully in support of the Third Reich but also sought to protect the Constitution. It also declared complete opposition to any form of “ism” including Fascism, emphasizing itself as simply being Nationally Socialistic. Furthermore, as represented in their oath, the Bund maintained that it was its own separate organization, supported neither officially nor monetarily by the German government.<sup>11</sup> Despite this lack of official recognition, Kuhn readily hyperbolized even the most tangential connections to the Third Reich. First seen in Spanknoebel’s translation of Hess’s cursory stamp of approval to the Friends of New Germany as a direct marching order from *Der Fuehrer*, the Bund continued this practice in its operation.<sup>12</sup> The most telling example of this comes out of Fritz Kuhn’s 1936 trip to Germany. While in Germany, Kuhn and several others including the head of the Midwestern Department, George Froboese, had an opportunity for a brief meeting with Hitler. The German government, recognizing the potential for propaganda due to the Olympic Games, met with multiple groups of foreigners throughout the tenure of the game. Even though it was truly no more than a cursory

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Wallace, *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindberg, and the Rise of the Third Reich* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 134.

<sup>11</sup> Canedy, *America’s Nazis*, 73-75.

<sup>12</sup> Canedy, *America’s Nazis*, 51.

meeting, Kuhn and others in the Bund portrayed their meeting with Hitler as a symbol of total support when the reality was Hitler and the German government never intended any such thing. The fact that Hitler himself considered the meeting a mistake was understandably left out of the Bund's portrayal of the event. Kuhn divorced himself so far from the truth to the point where he continued to refer back to this meeting as an example that he took personal orders directly from Hitler throughout his time in command.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Bitte das Camp in Ordnung halten. Abfaelle in die Koerbe werfen<sup>14</sup>**

In Milwaukee, the growth of the Bund perfectly mirrored that of the national counterpart. A Milwaukee chapter of the Friends of New Germany was organized right away in 1933 which, like the rest of the organization, transformed into the German-American Bund in 1936.<sup>15</sup> The Bund was organized into three main regions, East, West, and Midwest, each with their own regional headquarters and a number of local branches scattered throughout the region. The Midwestern region was centered in Chicago, but had three local branches in Wisconsin, Kenosha, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee.<sup>16</sup> The regional leader of the Bund in the Midwest was George Froboese, an active voice in Milwaukee since at least 1924 when he published an overview of Nationalist Socialist goals in Germany.<sup>17</sup> When the Friends of New Germany were organized, Froboese was among those who joined and had become influential within that circle

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<sup>13</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 252-258.

<sup>14</sup> "Camp Aflutter with Swastika Denies it Trains Young Nazis," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 23, 1937. Translated to "Please keep camp in order. Garbage must be thrown in waste basket," these words hung at the entrance to Camp Hindenburg in 1937 and were presented as a symbol of the positive aspects of the camp in this article

<sup>15</sup> "Bund was a Foe of America, Duffy Finds in Citizen Cases," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 35, 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Dieter Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community and the Nazi Challenge of the 1930's," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 71, no. 2 (Winter 1987-1988): 123.

to the point where he was included in the Bund's trip to Germany and stood side by side with Kuhn when they were given an audience with Hitler, a fact Froboese recorded in the 1937 yearbook for the Bund.<sup>18</sup>

One of the interesting aspects about the Milwaukee chapter of the German American Bund was the presence of a nearby youth camp, Camp Hindenburg. The presence of such a camp was not unique, yet there were only a few similar camps throughout the nation. Although the Bund claimed to have twenty-one such camps in the United States, the number is much closer to a dozen with roughly six containing actual structures on the premises.<sup>19</sup> Camp Hindenburg became one of these camps when it opened for the first time in 1937. This particular camp was located in Grafton, a small suburb twenty-four miles north of Milwaukee and placed underneath the cedar trees on the east bank of the Milwaukee River. In its first year, it served a total of 103 boys from Milwaukee and Chicago with the intention of functioning similar to a youth camp in Germany with German being spoken on the premises. Despite some similarities, the Bund was careful to highlight certain distinctions in an attempt to avoid conflicts. First of all, the camp denied that it was some sort of military camp and stressed that the inspections, flag raisings, and limited marching taking place at the camp could not be considered as such and there simply was an emphasis on athletics as a cornerstone of their routine. Furthermore, although the swastika certainly could be seen throughout the camp, the Bund emphasized such images should not be taken as a sign Camp Hindenburg was un-American. The American Flag was always flown above all others and, despite their presence, flags from German movements had no official standings in the camp. Karl Moeller, the youth leader of the camp, even went so far as to

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<sup>18</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 144, 255.

<sup>19</sup> Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community," 139.

promote the Bund as more American than the Boy Scouts. After quoting Fritz Kuhn on the fact only American citizens could join the Bund, Moeller went on to state, “our movement has no connection with the German Youth movement. The Boy Scouts of America cannot say the same. The scouts are an international organization and their leader and founder... is an alien so far as this country is concerned.”<sup>20</sup> These concerns directed towards the camp did not fade away. Two years later, Congressional Representative John Schafer of Milwaukee defended the Camp in the House of Representatives calling it, “merely the same as a YMCA camp where children spend their vacations.”<sup>21</sup>

Although the Camp first started its programming in 1937, the land that Camp Hindenburg rested on had only been rented by the Bund. Since the Bund did not own the land, it was able to be bought out from under them by the Federation of German-American Societies in 1939, a group opposed to the Bund. Although a blow to moral, the Bund founded a subsidiary company, the Grafton Settlement League, and was able to raise enough money to purchase a neighboring lot where they reopened the camp in 1939 and added buildings to the site, including several cottages to house Bund members at the camp itself.<sup>22</sup> At its new location, Camp Hindenburg resumed the same sort of practices that had always been conducted there, hosting speakers, running camps, and putting on events. Fritz Kuhn himself became one of these speakers when he visited the camp in May of 1939 and rallied his audience to defend the camp to the last man.<sup>23</sup> On August 27, 1939 Camp Hindenburg held its annual youth day rally, a day filled with

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<sup>20</sup> “Camp Aflutter with Swastika Denies it Trains Young Nazis,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 23, 1937.

<sup>21</sup> “Defends Camp of Bund Here,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1939.

<sup>22</sup> Berninger, “Milwaukee’s German-American Community,” 139; “Bund was a Foe of America, Duffy Finds in Citizen Cases,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 35, 1944.

<sup>23</sup> Berninger, “Milwaukee’s German-American Community,” 139

speeches, dances, and song.<sup>24</sup> Less than a week later, Germany invaded Poland, marking the beginning of World War II.

### **Without a Home**

The Bundists looking for acceptance in society were misplaced in their beliefs that they could find solace in America during the time leading up to World War II. Although they certainly had their followers and promoted themselves as Americans, the Bund faced opposition from numerous fronts throughout their existence. This sandwich of resistance consisted a meat of negative portrayals by the media, garnished with a healthy dose of scorn from other organizations, spiced with government endorsed investigations and spying, and finished between two hearty slices of public opposition.

The persistence of the media presented a double edged sword that the Bund did not always seem smart enough to grab by the hilt during their tenure. On the one hand, media could be used a tool for their personal propaganda and could be a wider outlet than their own internal outlets to try and broaden the spread of a doctrine of National Socialism or to publically defend against direct attacks. However, the media could also carry stories that promoted the idea or at least asked the question if the Bund was a Nazi organization with foreign ties. One example of the later is the media coverage that Fritz Kuhn received after his 1936 meeting with Adolf Hitler. A picture of the two shaking hands was circulated by the American media following the meeting. Although in the Bund's arsenal, this should have been a perfect piece of propaganda and Kuhn would certainly attempt to use it as such throughout much of his tenure as leader of the Bund, the overwhelming result of the circulation of this photograph was to shock many in the American public and to solidify opposition to the Bund. Instead of just facing Jewish organizations, for

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<sup>24</sup> "Youth Rally on Sunday at Camp Hindenburg," *Milwaukee Journal*, August 23, 1939.

which the Bund's overtly anti-Semitic nature naturally created enmity, the group found itself facing labor groups from both sides of the political spectrum and a larger portion of the American public who found themselves uncomfortable with stories they were hearing about the Bund.<sup>25</sup> Even if not actively working against the Bund, by continually reporting the investigations into the organization and presenting claims the Bund was militaristic, Nazi sympathizers, and un-American on a consistent basis, the media served to keep such stories in the public's consciousness and, in doing so, helped ferment wider opposition than any investigation, protest, or organization against the Bund could have done on its own.

Beyond competing for a positive spotlight in the media, the Bund in Wisconsin was forced to refute accusations from and compete with another German-American organization. Founded in 1932, the Federation of German-American Societies was an antithesis to the Bund in numerous respects. First of all, it was a local organization without any affiliation outside of the regional area unlike the nationally connected Bund. Furthermore, it was composed out of a conglomeration of around seventy to ninety separate societies all working together for a few more generalized objectives including the promotion of the German language both in and out of schools and a youth program. As has been mentioned, the group actually purchased the land on which Camp Hindenburg resided and used this land for their own recreational facilities, founding Camp Carl Schurz.<sup>26</sup> Aside from this, the Federation was tenaciously anti-Bund and attempted to thwart the Bund at every turn. After the creation of Camp Carl Schurz and reorganization of Camp Hindenburg less than a mile down the road, the two groups continued to display their mutual disdain for each other. Both attempted to outdo each other at parades to the disdain of

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<sup>25</sup>Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 257-258.

<sup>26</sup> Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community," 121-123.



Grafton citizens who were opposed to their city being a “parade ground for the rival factions.” There also is at least one occasion where one of the youth bands in the Federation, knowing where various Bund leaders were sleeping, went to a nearby bandstand in order to play loudly and wake them up.<sup>27</sup>

Although some aspects of this rivalry certainly could be considered petty, the opposition of the Federation to the Bund was not at all benign. Bernard Hofmann, leader of the Federation, testified in front of the House Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities against the Bund, claiming that they used intimidation and other strong arm tactics to try and pursue radical change to the American government and stating that in his idea, they did not draw off of a wide community of support in Wisconsin.<sup>28</sup> Froboese, of course, disagreed with this assessment by Hofmann and suggesting both that the Bund was actually more popular among German-Americans than the Federation<sup>29</sup> and called him a “traitor to his own people,” suggested he was part of a Jewish conspiracy to discredit the Bund, and even went so far as to claim “this ignorant windbag Hofmann can speak neither English nor German correctly.”<sup>30</sup> On a separate occasion, Froboese continued these attacks, writing, “A German American who accuses another American of German ancestry of fostering subversive activities just because the latter has the courage to defend the good name of his mother country against defamation and mudslinging, is according to

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<sup>27</sup> “Camps’ Flurry Stirs Grafton,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 11, 1939.

<sup>28</sup> Berninger, “Milwaukee’s German-American Community,” 134.

<sup>29</sup> “Bund Leader Cheered by Election Results,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1938. Froboese pointed to a recent election where the candidates whom the Bund endorsed won over some candidates indorsed by the Federation. The list of candidates whom the Bund indorsed was not made public and only circulated around Bund circles, making this claim hard to substantiate.

<sup>30</sup> “Bund Hurls Fiery Words as Nazi Foes Picket Hall,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 9, 1937.

our belief, a renegade to his race.”<sup>31</sup> These two organization and their respective summer camps continued to battle with words and actions for the duration of the Bund’s existence. It is impossible to truly say who garnered more popular support, but at the summer opening of each camp in 1940, the Federation did have 100 more attendees than the Bund as well as a speaker that demonstrated its wider support. While Froboese, leader of the Midwestern Bund spoke at Camp Hindenburg, Milwaukee Mayor Carl Zeidler was the principle speaker at the opening of Camp Carl Schurz with the subject, “Let Freedom Ring”.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly enough, Zeidler’s support of the Federation was not the first occasion where a Milwaukee mayor had stood against the Bund. His direct predecessor, Daniel Hoan, often voiced his opposition to “un-American” principles espoused by Nazi-sympathizing organizations,” while praising the principles of the Federation.<sup>33</sup> Hofmann’s arguments against the Bund also attracted other groups to investigate the Bund. His initial testimonies attracted the Wisconsin Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to prompt their own investigation into Camp Hindenburg. These actions actually coincided with a larger look into the various camps owned by the Bund, with the local and national investigations focusing on the idea of Bund camps being “un-American.”<sup>34</sup>

Along with negative press at the hands of the media, the Bund had to contend with the United States government. Stretching back to their direct predecessors in the Friends of New Germany, the way that both groups touted the idea of massive reform or even a National Socialistic revolution raised eyebrows in Washington very early on in their tenure. By 1934, a

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<sup>31</sup> “Bund Leader Cheered by Election Results,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1938.

<sup>32</sup> “Flag is Hoisted at Bund Camp,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 31, 1940.

<sup>33</sup> “Milwaukee Curbs Pro-Nazi Germans,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1939.

<sup>34</sup> “Veterans Eye Camp of Bund,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 26, 1937.

year after the creation of the Friends of New Germany, the Dickstein-McCormick Congressional Investigatory Committee became the first massive open investigation into the growing National Socialistic movement in the United States, widely supported by a Congressional vote of 168 in favor against 31 opposed. Although this preliminary investigation found that most German-American citizens were in fact loyal citizens, the Dickstein-McCormack Committee became one of the primary reasons the German government cut all ties to the Friends, resulting in their transformation into the Bund.<sup>35</sup> The Dickstein-McCormack Committee represented only the first government officials to call for investigations into the Bund, however, and Samuel Dickstein, for whom the Committee was partially named, would continue his fight against the Bund. Another implacable enemy from Washington in addition to Dickstein became Martin Dies, the representative from Texas who served as the chair to the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities.<sup>36</sup>

House Resolution 282, forming the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, alike to the Dickstein-McCormack Committee, was passed by an overwhelming majority in 1938, this time 191 in favor and 41 opposed. Although it certainly had a much wider scope than just investigating National Socialism in America, the Bund would find itself with an irascible enemy for the next couple of years. Besides from just the fact that they were being investigated, the Committee had a secondary effect that also served to harm the Bund. With the Committee's interest in the Bund being common knowledge, the media throughout the nation ramped up their coverage of the Bund, focusing on the question of un-Americanism.<sup>37</sup> This

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<sup>35</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 62-65.

<sup>36</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 175-179.

meant when the Committee released parts of their investigations, such as the translation of a manual published by the Bund which the Committee described as conclusive proof the Bund was, “an absolutely militarized organization, patterned after the ruthlessly efficient military set-up which characterizes Hitler’s machine in Germany,” the public was able to conduct their own trial of the organization in the court of public opinion, in this case thanks to *The New York Times*.<sup>38</sup> The Bund did not deign to take these investigations, perceived as attacks, without comment. Bernard Hofmann, who testified against the Bund in front of the Committee, claimed that the Bund had, on “many instances” threatened German-Americans and their families in Germany if they did not support the Bund. Hofmann himself reported being among those who received such a letter, his stating, “your turn will come, Hofmann.”<sup>39</sup> Besides stories of these underhanded tactics that may or may not have been employed by the Bund, leaders commented publically on their indignation of being faced with the charges leveled against them. Kuhn accused Congressman Dickstein of spreading, “bare-faced lies,” and tried to flip the accusations on their head, claiming Dickstein was, “purposely ignoring the subtle infiltration on every hand of communism.”<sup>40</sup> Froboese added on to these sentiments, claiming that Dickstein was Jewish which tied him into a larger conspiracy by the Jews against the Bund.<sup>41</sup> In response to Dies and the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, Froboese, after Dies suggested he would issue a subpoena, telegraphed Dies to directly request the opportunity to speak in front of the Committee in order to refute Hofmann’s testimonies against the Bund.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Bares Bund Creed; Calls it Military,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 1941.

<sup>39</sup> “Ickes is Attacked at Dies’s Hearing,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1938.

<sup>40</sup> “Bund Leader Hits at Foes,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 26, 1937.

<sup>41</sup> “Bund Hurls Fiery Words as Nazi Foes Picket Hall,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 9, 1937.

<sup>42</sup> “Bund Leader Cheered by Election Results,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1938.

In addition to these public calls for investigation, the United States government was actively spying on the German American Bund through the Federal Bureau of Investigation. A memorandum from for FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover from June 9, 1939 marked:

Second-that the German-American Bund and the Communist Party, U.S.A, are representatives of foreign organizations within the meaning of the act and that further investigation should be made for the purpose of authenticating documents and declarations appearing in the record and to establish the relation of agency between the German Nazis and the German-American Bund.<sup>43</sup>

As is made evident in this memorandum, the Bund was not unique for being spied on, yet the undercover investigation of the Bund is notable for both its scale and scope. In compliance with the Freedom of Information/ Privacy Acts, the FBI has released eleven collections of documents, in all 16,642 total pages, relating to their investigations into the German-American Bund from 1939 to 1941.<sup>44</sup>

Camp Hindenburg did not escape this scrutiny by the FBI although it was by no means a major focus of the agency. Included in the papers of former FBI agent Kenneth Walker, who was tasked with investigating the Bund and later prosecuting certain members, is a number of documents that attest to the fact the FBI was spying, or at the very least taking stock of, the Milwaukee Bund. The photographs in this collection include a picture of a Bund meeting on May 27, 1939 as well as a march by the Bund the following day at Camp Hindenburg.<sup>45</sup> Separate from the FBI, the Milwaukee Police Department detailed detectives to watch over secret meetings of

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<sup>43</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Memorandum for Mr. Hoover, June 9, 1939*, Part 2, Freedom of Information/ Privacy Acts Release: German American Bund, 1939-1941, FBI Records: The Vault <http://vault.fbi.gov/german-american-bund> (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> These documents are available for viewing or downloading through the FBI's records on their website which can be found at [vault.fbi.gov/german-american-bund](http://vault.fbi.gov/german-american-bund).

<sup>45</sup> Photograph of Bund March at Camp Hindenburg, May 28, 1939, Kenneth Walker Papers, 1939-1946, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

the Bund and the reports from these investigations claim they were both “anti-Semitic in nature and in general critical of American institution.”<sup>46</sup>

It is unclear the degree to which the Bund knew they were being spied on by the FBI, but nothing this author has seen suggests any knowledge by the organization beyond the public investigations reported in various news sources. Judging by their reaction to being investigated by the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, if the Bund knew they were being watched, they would have tried to use it as proof of a wider conspiracy directed at them. Regardless of their extent or lack of knowledge, the sheer fact the Bund was on the radar of the United States Government enough to merit surveillance for several of years across the country provides strong evidence that they were not buying into Kuhn and the rest of the Bund’s declarations that they were in no way affiliated with the German Government, a strong indication that many of the general public may have also had their doubt about this controversial organization.

Some of these public worries, fueled by Congressional investigations and media coverage, manifested itself in a very noticeable way. It is hard to gauge what percent of the American public felt one way or the other about the Bund, but the presence of things such as protests and even violent reprisals from everyday citizens speak to at least the presence of some degree of general unease, especially keeping in mind the situation overseas. During a Bund meeting celebrating the partitioning of Czechoslovakia in Chicago, a large group of protestors gathered outside and when several individuals tried to break through the police lines around the building where the meeting was taking place, the police had to call in reserve forces and required the use of over 100 policemen to disperse the protestors and maintain the police. The same day, a

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<sup>46</sup> “Milwaukee Curbs Pro-Nazi Germans,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1939.

meeting in Syracuse, New York was broken up by a riot consisting of Bund members and protestors, prompting an investigation into the Bund there.<sup>47</sup>

In Milwaukee, these oppositions became openly manifest after the 1937 opening of Camp Hindenburg. Calls by congressmen that the camp, and the 16 other similar camps operated throughout the United States, were “Nazi military training camps” were refuted by the Bund on numerous occasions, but their denials did not sate the public’s worries.<sup>48</sup> In other parts of Wisconsin, Bund events saw protests the same year. A speaking event in Kenosha that drew in a crowd of about 400 also saw about sixty picketers from the local community who lambasted the Bund members as “Nazi murderers” and “Bloody Hitler’s agents”, criticizing the use of the Nazi Party salute and the swastika by the Bund. Police were on standby for any violence, but did not follow Froboese’s wishes to remove the protestors and on this occasion, no major violence broke out.<sup>49</sup> By 1939 with both Camp Hindenburg of the Bund and Camp Carl Schurz of the Federation of German-American Societies existing within a mile of each other, people in Grafton were fed up with the issues of Milwaukeeans and tired of being labeled as “the German bund town.” The lack of desire by some to house the Bund was not simply due to how their town was viewed by outsiders, however. There were numerous rumors making their way around about threats being made at parades and fistfights breaking out between the Bund youth and the young people of Grafton. Although many of the residents tried to maintain their indifference and the neighbors of both camps seemed to be fine with their respective neighbors, dissatisfaction with the Bund was not fading away quickly.<sup>50</sup> The next year, the annual opening of Camp Hindenburg was faced

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<sup>47</sup> “Police Reserves Break Up Chicago Bund Foe Rally,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 17, 1939.

<sup>48</sup> “Camp Aflutter with Swastika Denies it Trains Young Nazis,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 23, 1937.

<sup>49</sup> “Bund Hurls Fiery Words as Nazi Foes Picket Hall,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 9, 1937.

<sup>50</sup> “Camp Flurry Stirs Graton,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 11, 1939.

with the threats of protests by the people of Grafton against the “Nazi” community.<sup>51</sup> These sort of protest became commonplace by 1939. By this year, larger numbers of organized protesters had become a staple of any event put on by the Milwaukee Bund signifying a broad reaching discontent by the American public as a whole against the organization.<sup>52</sup> Froboese even acknowledged the violence that plagued every Bund meeting, stating that, if the protests and attacks against the Bund did not stop, “there will be bloodshed and someone will get killed... We came pretty close to having something like that happen at our last three meetings.” Of course, Froboese was of the opinion that communists were behind these protests, but even so, the fact that they happened so often and only seemed to increase in violence suggests the growing discontent within the community of Milwaukee and throughout the country towards the German American Bund.<sup>53</sup>

### **Downfall and Demise**

Although these oppositions certainly sent the Bund reeling, the final knockout punch was delivered by a number of scandals and controversies that arose in the Bund’s final years and would continue to plague former members even after the Bund had collapsed. The first scandal that spelled the impending collapse of the Bund surrounded its leader, Fritz Kuhn. With growing opposition towards the Bund as a whole from all sides, officials in New York starting looking for a way to cut off the head of the organization so that it might wither and die. In 1939, the District Attorney in New York, Thomas Dewey, began investigating the financial side of the Bund,

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<sup>51</sup> “Flag is Hoisted at Bund Camp,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 31, 1940. The protests on these occasions did not materialize as the opening ceremony was moved forward by three hours. The Bund denied threats of protest were behind the change in time but did not provide an alternative reason.

<sup>52</sup> Berninger, “Milwaukee’s German-American Community,” 140.

<sup>53</sup> “German Hour Causes a Row,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 4, 1939.



looking for inconsistencies that could lead to an indictment. In May of 1939, Dewey seized the Bund's financial records and by November of the same year, Kuhn had been arrested, charged, and was standing trial for larceny and forgery due to inconsistencies found in the seized records. Despite an outcry of support from Bund members and claims that he was the center of some sort of great Jewish conspiracy, Kuhn was found guilty on December 5, 1939. Made deputy Fuhrer of the organization in September, Gerhard Kunze immediately filled in Kuhn's spot as head of the Bund. His first order of business began the following day when, on December 6, after a secret meeting of Bund officials, Fritz Kuhn was officially expelled from the organization.<sup>54</sup>

Despite a new style of leadership, it quickly became evident that Kunze was in no way suited for a leadership position in an organization that could not find a safe haven and that the Bund was nearing collapse. Instead of trying to reform the organization into something more palatable to the American public, Kunze made several decrees that provoked outside scrutiny, or would have if his decrees had been followed. In his tenure as leader, he had both commanded that alien Bund members should refuse to answer one of the questions on their alien registration form and for Bund members to refrain from induction into the draft. Both commands resulted in indictments for those few who followed his commands, but members overwhelmingly rejected these ideas. By August of 1941, frustrated by the futility of his position, Kunze attempted to resign, claiming, "If each of you had earnestly approaches the negligent Bund members and sympathizers and appealed to their honor we would have succeeded." Unfortunately for Kunze, the Bund did not accept his resignation at this point and he remained the leader until November 13. At this point, Froboese, who had risen to from the head of the Midwestern branch to be deputy under Kunze, and the rest of the executive committee formally removed Kunze from his

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<sup>54</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 329-333.

leadership role for both his increasingly odd actions and failing to show up at the very meeting where his leadership was terminated. In a bizarre twist, the Bund was unable to get the message to Kunze since he had seemingly vanished. It later transpired that Kunze was actually an Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) agent who had gone into hiding at the start of November.<sup>55</sup> With the dismissal of its leader, Froboese stepped in as acting director of the Bund, although his new position lasted for less than a month. Trying to contradict the writing on the wall, he attempted to rally remaining Bund members, writing on December 2, 1941, “We all wanted the fight, we have therefore the obligation to persevere... We must carry on, comrades!”<sup>56</sup> In the wake of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war against Germany, the Bund was order to be dissolved by the Federal Government, officially putting an end to the controversial organization that had captivated national attention, criticisms, and oppositions for the past half-decade. The final leader of the Bund met his end soon after. Called to answer a federal subpoena in New York in the court cases that ensued following the downfall of the Bund, Froboese opted to ignore his final official message of perseverance. On June 15, 1942, George Froboese committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a train while traveling through Indiana on the way to New York.<sup>57</sup> Fritz Kuhn’s final chapters were more drawn out. While serving time for his earlier conviction, Kuhn was put on trial for his citizenship with nineteen other former Bund members. He and ten others were ruled to have violated their naturalization oaths and were stripped of their citizenship in 1943. Paroled to an internment camp for the remainder of the war, Kuhn was returned to

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<sup>55</sup> Kunze remained in hiding until he was able to escape to Mexico with the help of the German spy network in 1942. He was caught by Mexican authorities within the year, returned to the United States, and sentenced to fifteen years for several charges including espionage.

<sup>56</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 342-345.

<sup>57</sup> “Bund Aide Ends Life on Way to Hearing,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1942.

Germany only to find himself charged as a minor war criminal and imprisoned at the Dachau Concentration Camp, now an Allied controlled prison, in 1947. He escaped this imprisonment briefly, but while on the run, Kuhn was sentenced to a ten year sentence in a trial without a defendant, witnesses, or a defense lawyer. He was found six months later and returned to prison until a successful appeal in 1950. Kuhn passed away a year later Munich, Germany.<sup>58</sup>

In Wisconsin, the aftermath of the Bund's collapse took a similar path to Kuhn's as twenty five members of the Milwaukee Bund found themselves facing a denaturalization trial.<sup>59</sup> Fourteen of these twenty five found their way to the Federal District Court in Milwaukee between the summer of 1943 and May of 1944. The highest ranking and best known of these offenders, Paul Knauer, was one of members of the Bund who found themselves stripped of their citizenship and denaturalized.<sup>60</sup> Despite numerous appeals and support from several Congressman who attempted to block his deportation, Knauer found himself forced back to his native Germany in 1948, becoming one of fifty seven German immigrants who were ruled to have betrayed their naturalization oaths and banished from the United States.<sup>61</sup> Unlike Kuhn, however, Knauer lived to see himself return to Milwaukee. After years of fighting his removal from the country, finally granted status as a "legally admitted alien" in 1957.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 346-350. Diamond also discusses the unfortunate fate of Heinz Spanknobel, organizer of the Friends of New Germany. In 1953, twenty years after the investigation that prompted Spanknobel's flight to Germany, the United States Justice Department and the FBI launched an investigation into his whereabouts with the intent of bringing him back to the United States for trial. It transpired that Spanknobel had been drafted into the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) and, in the course of the war, found himself imprisoned in a Soviet prison camp where he eventually died of starvation in 1947.

<sup>59</sup>"Bund was a Foe of America, Duffy Finds in Citizen Cases," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 25, 1944.

<sup>60</sup> Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community," 140.

<sup>61</sup> "Paul Knauer Goes Home," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 10, 1948.

<sup>62</sup> "Exiled as Pro-Nazi, Paul Knauer Back," *Milwaukee Journal*, August 16, 1957.

## **Conclusion**

From its very beginning as the Friends of New Germany or even the start of National Socialism in America with the Nationalist Socialist Teutonia Association, the German American Bund faced the problem of supporting a countercultural idea in a country that had and would return to a direct military and ideological war with their ancestral homeland of Germany. Other organizations, other individuals, or other ideals may have found an easier time assimilating into American culture, but despite self-emphasis on the fact that they were at heart an American organization, the Bund never achieved the acceptance and influence it felt it so rightfully deserved, largely due unforeseen consequences in how the Bund and its leaders chose to present themselves to the American public. The Bund is not entirely to blame for their own failures, however. In their tenure, they faced a fire of opposition consisting of public opposition fed by fears, fanned by the media, stoked by organized resistance, and supported by members of a government who made the Bund the prime target of both public and secret onslaughts. Without taking the time to dramatically reorganize, the Bund never stood a chance. When their end came, hastened by scandal and completed by war, it marked the end of a long and almost certainly inevitable process. Even at its strongest moments, the Bund could never have survived in an America at war with Germany and even if a declaration of war had been delayed, the Bund would have collapsed upon itself as it had already started to do as early as 1939 when organized public opposition became an everyday reality for the organization. Riding on the rhetoric of revolution, the German American Bund saw itself reinvigorating the American people and bringing about a wave of National Socialistic reform. Instead, the Bund found itself besieged by dissent for the entirety of its existence and quickly faded into obscurity, leaving little impact on

the American political system and even less of an impact on the cedar trees which once paid silent witness to their attempts to organize on the banks of the Milwaukee River.

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