



Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund **Readers Guide**

Q&A with Arnie Bernstein

Q. What inspired you to write *Swastika Nation*?

A. I saw Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and was fascinated by the film's premise of Jewish renegades slugging it out with Nazis. Surely there had to be true stories of such commandoes! I researched the topic out of simple curiosity. The deeper I went, the more fascinating the stories became. I knew it was something I had to write about. Eventually my reading led me from Europe to the United States and the disparate elements that fought Nazis on our home turf. The story of Fritz Kuhn and the German-American Bund was largely relegated to a few anecdotes in various books, when the reality was that it had profound impact on pre-WWII America.

Q. Where did you get your information?

A. There are thousands of pages on Kuhn and his group within the files of the FBI. I scoured through these documents, and found story after story. Other materials, including newspaper articles, accounts written by some of the principles and their associates, history books, and academic studies of the Bund were also useful. I managed to find a few relatives of some of my characters and they gave me wonderful insights into what drove both my heroes and villains. I saw all of these elements as parts of an enormous historical jigsaw puzzle. I knew what the overall picture looked like; it was just a matter of figuring out how the pieces of that puzzle all fit together.

Q. What surprised you the most in the writing of *Swastika Nation*?

A. I think it was the divergent scope of my characters. Let's face it, any book where one of the heroes is Meyer Lansky, who turned organized crime into big business, and one of the villains is Henry Ford, who did the same for American manufacturing, is going to be an interesting ride for both writer and reader. I did have a dream cast, albeit some of the major players were heinous individuals. After all, Fritz Kuhn was a Nazi, liar, cheat, crook, womanizer, and deluded comic fool who was an embarrassment to Adolf Hitler (imagine a Nazi so irksome that he annoys Hitler!). Yet somehow, in spite of all his dichotomies Kuhn had the skill and cunning to lead a national movement and attract thousands of loyal followers. All the historical figures within my narrative offered interesting challenges for me as writer in bringing them to life on the page: Walter Winchell and his cynicism; Fiorello La Guardia and his political skills; the shadowy side of Henry Ford's life; and killers like Lansky, Mickey Cohen, and Jack Ruby trying to redeem themselves of their sins.

Q. The German-American Bund saw themselves as patriotic, pro-American activists. Do you see any parallels between the German-American Bund and any political factions of today?

A. I get asked that question a lot and my answer is a resounding “no!” At their core, the German-American Bund were Nazis devoted to imposing fascism and an NSDAP styled government on the United States. I've seen blog posts comparing the Bund to ideologues of all varieties from right wing to left wing. It's a disingenuous analogy. Kuhn and his Bundists were true Nazis, devoted to Hitler and his aspirations. Their vision of this country was an American version of the Third Reich, following right behind Hitler's goose steps, which was unique to the movement and its times.

Discussion Questions

1. Some of the characters in *Swastika Nation* use violence to stop Fritz Kuhn and the German- American Bund. Is violent action a reasonable response people like Fritz Kuhn and the German-American Bund? Similarly, many influential people, such as New York Mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, Congressman Samuel Dickstein, and newspaperman Walter Winchell use their respective bully pulpits to go after Bund. Where they justified in using their power in this manner?
2. Today the German-American Bund would be classified as a hate group. Do you see any differences or similarities between their actions and organized hate groups of today?
3. Fritz Kuhn was protected by the First Amendment to say what he pleased. What do you think about the meaning of “freedom of speech?” How should we respond when groups like the German-American Bund present themselves in public?
4. This is a book where bad guys like mobsters are seen as good guys, while people considered as upright American icons, like Henry Ford and Walt Disney, are seen in darker shades. How has reading this book changed your opinion of any of these people?
5. What does the title “*Swastika*” *Nation* mean?
6. Talk about specific passages or moments in the book that struck you as significant, interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad, or...? What was memorable?
7. At the end of *Swastika Nation* Bernstein points out that other American Nazi groups continued long after Fritz Kuhn's fall. In fact, almost fifty years after the main action August Klapprott, one of Kuhn's peers, is seen as a hero when he addresses a Holocaust denier group. Why do you think some factions still cling to these extremist views?
8. What do you think are the lessons of *Swastika Nation*?