

Fascism, Anti-Semitism, and the Roots of Oregon's White Power Movement

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Conducted through archival research of primary documents including period newspaper articles, meeting notes, and political pamphlets at the Oregon Historical Society, this article investigates the development of inter-war fascism in Oregon as a key inflection point in the germination of the modern white power movement. Contrasting the novel organization and dissemination of inter-war fascism in Oregon with the earlier rise of the Ku Klux Klan, this research illustrates the influences of European ideological currents on the domestic far right as it attempted to consolidate dispersed networks of ethnic interest groups and political leaders into a radical force for change. We track the successes and failures of the fascist movement as its followers integrated within the ranks of law enforcement and public officials, and the impact of the Second World War on their ensuing, conflictive relationship with the federal government. Our findings indicate that the inter-war fascist movement in Oregon saw the broadening of U.S. "Americanism" to include Catholics and immigrants while simultaneously seeing its numbers dwindle. This emergence of a more inclusive sense of whiteness, combined with resentment against the

¹ This article is an extended study based on an earlier paper the authors published. Shane Burley, and Alexander Reid Ross. "From Nativism to White Power: Mid-Twentieth-Century White Supremacist Movements in Oregon." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 564-87. Accessed February 11, 2020. doi:10.5403/oregonhistq.120.4.0564. A substantial portion of that text has been reprinted here.

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federal government following the Second World War, produced new conceptualizations of “white nationalism” and “white power” as revolutionary slogans far removed from the politically-powerful, populist mass movement that the Klan created in the 1920s. However, we argue that political marginalization of rural areas by the left only reifies the popularization of the far-right Patriot movement as an “outsider force,” normalizing fascist ideology in the process. [Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2019 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan penetrated many aspects of Oregon’s social and political life, but the Klan’s influence here as well as elsewhere rapidly declined in the middle of that decade. The kind of right-wing politics that it perpetuated did not completely disappear, however, as new fascist and racist organizations gained a foothold in the Pacific Northwest during the 1930s and after. These organizations moved away from the “100 percent Americanism” of the Klan, embracing the racialist politics of foreign nations, predominantly Nazi Germany. Though these organizations were much smaller and less influential than the Klan had been, they are worthy of historical attention because they had elements of state support, especially in their vehement opposition to communist influence, and they would provide some of the mythology, the origin stories, that would not only reaffirm white supremacy, but also root their organizations firmly in the land and in religious history.

That Oregon was a center of Klan influence is a well-known story. Rising to influence in the years after World War One, the KKK was a white nationalist organization that primarily sought to limit the influence of Jews and Catholics and to curtail immigration. In 1922, it was the critical force that helped to defeat incumbent Republican Benjamin Olcott and to place Democrat Walter Pierce in the Oregon governor’s mansion. At the same time, Klan power among the electorate resulted in the passage of the Compulsory Public School Act that aimed to force all students into the public schools, a “100 percent Americanist” effort to curtail priestly control over Catholic children. In the next legislative session, Klan

legislators led the way in passing the Alien Land Act of 1923 that prevented Japanese and other “aliens” who could not become naturalized from owning land in the state. The Klan was an expression of white supremacy—its mention of nonwhites was always cast in terms of subservience—of Protestant nationalism, of Victorian morality, and perhaps of a fascist understanding of the people and the state.²

The Klan’s direct influence was brief—scandals, especially involving the sexual assault by a Klan leader in Indiana, aided its downfall—only to be supplanted by smaller fringe organizations that would rise up in the wake of Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany in 1933. Active cells of the Friends of New Germany—later to be supplanted by the German-American Bund—and the Silver Shirts, were inspired by the rise of fascist militarism in Germany and Italy. Devoted to white supremacy, these organizations were less imbued with Protestant nationalism, evidenced by their willingness to enroll Catholics in the cause. Thoroughly antisemitic, these fascist fringe groups focused on Jewish influence in banking and in the Roosevelt administration, and this led them in directions less emphasized by the Klan. Leaders of these organizations worked with right-wing extremists among Native Americans like Elwood Towner, who were disenchanted with New Deal changes in Indian policy, and some of them, like William Dudley Pelley, could express themselves within the terms of spiritualism and esoteric religion. In these years, mythologies were fluid, as members and leaders of organizations borrowed from earlier lines of

² Works on the Klan in Oregon are plentiful. They include Eckard Toy, “The Ku Klux Klan in Oregon,” in G. Thomas Edwards and Carlos A. Schwantes, *Experiences in a Promised Land: Essays in Pacific Northwest History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 270; Toy, “Robe and Gown: The Ku Klux Klan in Eugene, Oregon, during the 1920s,” in Shawn Lay, *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 156; David A. Horowitz, “Order, Solidarity, and Vigilance: The Ku Klux Klan in La Grande, Oregon,” in Lay, *The Invisible Empire in the West*, 209; Horowitz, “The Klansman as Outsider: Ethnocultural Solidarity and Antielitism in the Oregon Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 80 (January 1989): 12-20; and Paul M. Holsinger, “The Oregon School Bill Controversy, 1922-1925,” *Pacific Historical Review* 37 (August 1968): 327-341. Also useful is the chapter on the Klan in Robert D. Johnston’s, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 223-247.

thought, all of which rejected the rationalist logic of modernizing society. Though their numbers remained small, these organizations provided a crucial link in the development of the radical right of the post-war era.³

These fascist groups relied on a *herrenvolk* sense of fairness that resonated with contemporary “progressive” discourse about social progress and community control; they could sound “populistic.” But ethnicity was the key category: the leadership of these organizations repeatedly asserted that the rise of the New Deal state amounted to a consolidation of a Jewish-dominated ruling class that was responsible for the impoverishment of common people (though their rhetorical anger was mounted not only against elites but also marginalized groups and unions).⁴ Roger Griffin emphasizes the mythic constructions that such organizations applied to their historical role; for him fascism is defined by “palingenetic ultranationalism,” which assumes the necessity of national rebirth to reclaim a mythically pure past.⁵ Fascism can then be defined as a mass movement to “reclaim” a type of society rooted in traditionalism, hierarchy, and militarism, and centered on an intense sense of identity for a particular people. In the interwar period, these fascist movements emerged in Oregon as a part of a larger European political movement, influenced by rise of fascism in Germany and Italy and taking ideological inspiration from those successful examples.

The primary identity expressed throughout much of the rise of fascist movements in Europe and North America, particularly during the interwar period, was racial. White supremacy can be defined as a set of ideological or institutional precepts attributing superiority of the white race over non-white races. This can be expressed in a variety of ways, including institutional inequality favoring whites or a conscious ideology arguing in favor of this racial hierarchy.⁶ This combination of discursive right-wing populism and the emphasis on mythic origins characterizes the rise of the

³ The literature on fascist organization in Oregon is much less extensive than that on the Klan, reflecting the smaller size of the movement. See Eckard Toy, “Silver Shirts in the Northwest: Politics, Prophecies, and Personalities in the 1930s,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 80 (October 1989): 139-146.

⁴ Cas Mudde defines populism as a movement that sees two groups in antagonism with each other, a corrupt elite and the people. *The Far Right in America* (NY: Routledge, 2018), 3-4. Also see Martin Durham, *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (NY: Routledge, 2007), 8.

⁵ Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 40-45; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34-40.

⁶ George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), xi.

extreme right in the aftermath of the Klan and the white supremacist ideology it was rooted in.

After the Ku Klux Klan's decline in the late 1920s, Oregon white supremacists scattered into much smaller rival organizations, attempting to regain their former influence. The Klan tried to resuscitate its organization, dubiously claiming 17,000 members by the late thirties.⁷ Fred Gifford, the former Grand Dragon of the Klan, helped to form the National Crusaders, while former Klan newspaper editor Lem Dever joined with Roy Metcalf in the National Brotherhood. In the power struggles that ensued, the formerly fraternal Klansmen accused one another of being spies for the "Jewish committee."⁸ More vital organization would depend on foreign developments, particularly the 1933 rise of Adolph Hitler to power in Germany, which would provide the inspiration necessary to consolidate white supremacists into fascist organizations in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

A few of these organizations were comprised of German immigrants, many of whom had immigrated after the Treaty of Versailles assigned Germany financial and political accountability for the carnage of World War I, and many of them held disdain for the liberal-leaning Weimar Republic. In the United States, they experienced hostility lingering from the war, and this helped produce a sense of radical political alienation through which latent antisemitic sentiments could be expressed. Anti-Weimar organizations were established in the 1920s, such as the Teutonia Association (Nationalsozialistische Vereinigung Teutonia), which existed from 1923 to 1932. After the fall of the Weimar government, it was succeeded by the Friends of New Germany (Bund der Freunde des Neuen Deutschland) and then by the German-American Bund (Amerika-Deutscher Volksbund). These organizations required German language skills and members needed to guarantee that they possessed Aryan racial pedigrees.⁹

The Portland chapter of the Friends of New Germany came under the influence of Adam Hochscheid who became president of the chapter in 1933.¹⁰ A virulent anti-Semite, Hochscheid edited the popular German language newspaper, the *Nachrichten*, which he now used to defend the Nazi regime. Some of its efforts were commercial, as it fought a boycott

⁷ "Hooded Klan Meets," *Portland News-Telegram*, November 25, 1937.

⁸ Report on far right, Early November 1933, George Rennar Collection, MSS 2918, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

⁹ Roberta Lee Schmalenberger. 1983. "The German-Oregonians, 1850-1918." Dissertations and Theses. Paper 3430; 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

of German businesses and warned its readers “that lies were [being] spread about Germany.” The *Nachrichten* provided its readers lists of Friends of New Germany-endorsed businesses. In 1935, members of the Friends of New Germany began handing out an American National Party flyer that listed the crimes they attributed to Jews, and encouraged supporters to “Buy Gentile! Employ Gentile! Vote Gentile!” Soon after, Hochscheid stepped down from his position as president to focus on the *Nachrichten*, but the group was already in decline.¹¹

After the United States government declared the Friends of New Germany to be an extension of the German Nazi Party, the organization dissolved, only to be replaced by the German-American Bund. It grew slowly. Within a year of its establishment in 1936, the German-American Bund claimed only ninety Portland members. However, it sought to make itself relevant through extravagant regalia and performance, as uniformed Bund members entered Portland’s halls saluting before a portrait of George Washington, whose legacy the Bund leadership appropriated—particularly as it pertained to warnings against foreign entanglements.¹² The Bund’s relevance would lie in its willingness to put aside ethnic grievance and to develop overlapping membership, building bridges with other far right and ethnic communities that came together around anti-Semitic narratives.

The rise of the Nazi party in Germany also led to a native-born fascist response, inspiring William Dudley Pelley, a former screenwriter who had left his Hollywood life behind after a night vision had led him down the road of spiritualism and esoteric religion. With the rise of Hitler, Pelley’s idiosyncratic Christian ideology increasingly incorporated intense antisemitism and Nazi affinities, and he incorporated these into the Silver Legion, more commonly known as the Silver Shirts. Openly pro-Nazi, the Silver Legion soon boasted a membership of 400 in Oregon.¹³ Meetings

¹¹ Schmalenberger, “The German-Oregonians, 1850-1918,” 63; “Record of Sworn Statement made by Otto F. Decker,” U. S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Portland Oregon File No. 235-4093; “Where do YOU Buy?” Portland: A. E. Kern & Company, 1-3 George E. Rennar Papers.

¹² Police Informant Report on German-American bund. “Report: Activities of Portland branch German American Bund [mid-1938],” George E. Rennar Papers; Anna Bernstein, *Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 189.

¹³ A Portland observer commented that in 1933 “one of the local Italian societies joined *en masse*.” On Pelley, see Suzanne G. Ledboer, “The Man who would be Hitler: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion,” *California History* 65 (June 1986): 127-136; Scott Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press), 63-71, 80-90. Also useful is Eckard V. Toy, “Silver Shirts in the Northwest.”

of the Silver Shirts included lengthy speeches by white supremacists, Klansmen, and regional organizers like Roy Zachary, a Seattle restaurateur who helped shape the Washington-based Christian Party as the political wing of the movement. Speakers addressed the destructive nature of the Federal Reserve System and its monetary policy, which they connected to Jewish influence, while others stressed the need to liberate “Aryan” men from the evils of Jewish Communism. On August 15, 1936, Pelley gave a speech in Portland, which according to the *Oregon Liberal*, a weekly broadsheet edited by former Klansman Lem Devers, was attended by some 500 Silver Shirts.¹⁴

The Silver Legion remained active through the 1930s, chapters appearing in The Dalles, Bend, Medford, Toledo, and St. Helens. By 1939, the Silver Shirts boasted 125 neighborhood councils in Portland with between six and twenty members each, as well as several councils across the Columbia River in neighboring Vancouver, Washington.¹⁵ In that year, between 250 and 300 people came to an event in Portland to hear Roy Zachary engage in extremist rhetoric. “Every red blooded American citizen should have a good gun and ammunition,” Zachary told an enraptured crowd. “Put up a target and have your wife practice shooting it if you want to keep a free government.”¹⁶ Increasingly, the far right saw the state as captured by foreign, particularly Jewish interests, labeling Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “President Rosenfeld.” This paranoid idea would later crystalize in the post-war period with the far right’s portrayal of the U.S. government as explicitly the project of Zionist Jews, whom they believed were capturing political and economic systems through the Federal Reserve to exact their control.¹⁷ As a corollary to their antisemitism, the Silver Shirt’s narrative embraced American populist discourse that stressed vaguely defined “elites” who lacked loyalty to the hard-working white working class.

Similar messaging was produced by the Bund, which also tried to implant the narrative of the “vast Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy,” declaring that their main purpose, and that of Nazi Germany, was to fight the scourge of Communism, which threatened the destruction of America.¹⁸ Thus, a

¹⁴ “Portland Jews in Danger of Losing Many Friends,” *Oregon Liberal*, 1:18, September 11, 1936, pg. 1

¹⁵ Silver Shirts Meeting Report, February 10, 1939, George E. Rennar Papers.

¹⁶ Silver Shirts Meeting Report, June 16, 1939, George E. Rennar Papers.

¹⁷ George Michael, *Willis Carto and the American Far Right* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 106.

¹⁸ Leland V. Bell, “The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund, 1936-1941.” *Political Science Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (1970): 587.

group comprised of recent immigrants from Germany could join a nativist movement by embracing a distorted understanding of the United States as a nationalist entity that required white immigrants to protect it from subversion by Jewish cabals. Jewishness, foreignness, the elites, and the communists became interlocking and virtually synonymous components of the same conceptual model of this burgeoning fascist movement, as whiteness effectively became the sole criteria for entrance into the national community.

Whereas the Roosevelt administration monitored them for dangerous activities, portions of local government sometimes found them useful, particularly as a counterforce to Communist influence. The Portland Police Bureau integrated the Silver Shirts into their broad efforts to quash communist influence, particularly among organized labor. Formed in the 1910s to keep labor unions in check, the Bureau's secretive "Red Squad" faced mounting pressure in civil society beginning in 1937.¹⁹ The Red Squad produced a series of five-page reports that detailed different groups, unions, organizers, and teachers harboring "red" sympathies. By August 1937, the Red Squad's leader, Captain Walter Odale, had joined a new and secretive Silver Shirts spin-off called the American Defenders.²⁰ According to meeting notes, the American Defenders received support from a man named "Kemp"—likely Wilford Kemp, a San Diego millionaire who was Pelley's running mate on the Christian Party ticket in 1936, the political arm of the Silver Legion. In turn, the American Defenders contributed \$100 toward printing Pelley's propaganda and made plans for a "Committee of One Thousand" to serve as a vigilante organization.

Amid mounting pressure, on October 1, 1937, Odale, who called Portland "the third largest center of Nazi activity in the United States," concluded the Red Squad "Weekly Report of Communist Activities" by associating fascist organizations with anti-Communism. He asserted, "It can be safely said, that if it were not for the Communist Party, there would be no Fascist or Nazi scare."²¹ It would prove the final Red Squad report, as controversy mounted after the *Oregonian* revealed on October 26, 1937, that the Police Bureau's "Red Squad" and school district board director Louis E. Starr had interrogated a student union leader at Lincoln High

¹⁹ See W.K. Patrick, "New Social Order," In "Views on All Sides of Current Topics," *Oregonian*, May 24, 1937.

²⁰ Untitled American Defenders meeting notes, Sept. 17th, 1937, George E. Rennar Papers.

²¹ Walter Odale. Weekly Report of Communist Activities. Bureau of Police, Portland, Oregon. October 1, 1937, George E. Rennar Papers.

School.²² About a month later, a busy meeting of American Defenders decided that the “work and records” of Odale’s Red Squad “will be taken over by a new [private] organization, Americans Incorporated.”²³

The first issue of Americans Incorporated’s *Radical Activities Bulletin* came out ten days later, picking up where the Red Squad left off. With lengthy articles on the activities of the CIO organizing timber workers and the Portland School Board, the *Radical Activities Bulletin* kept tabs on the left and campaigned for the right. It reported that “one Legion post” in Milton-Freewater, “sent in a [anti-union] petition in less than three hour’s time.”²⁴ The organization looked abroad as well, condemning leftist support for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War as pro-Soviet and anarchistic, while it denounced a Chinese picket against a pig iron plant sending munitions to the genocidal Japanese Empire as “anti-anti-communist.”²⁵ As the Anti-Defamation League’s David Robinson noted, the organization attracted “certain fascist individuals who saw an opportunity to ride their hobby under the guide of fighting communism.” Police captain Walter Odale was on the board of directors, and Louis Starr headed up the organization, with other key members being prominent police officers and businessmen.²⁶ Despite the revelation that the German government considered Americans Incorporated a friend of the Third Reich, former governor Charles H. Martin, who had in 1935 put the state’s resources at the disposal of timber companies fighting a strike, now was willing to be the public honorary chairman of an Americans Incorporated rally against Communism.²⁷

Small as they were, the various organizations developed an ecumenical cultural apparatus, including meeting places, that allowed for the spread of ideas and personnel. The American Defenders, Bund, and Silver Shirts met in houses, cafes, and in Portland’s Turnverein Hall, run by pro-Nazi activist Otto Uhle, as well as the Norse Hall, Woodman Hall, and the Redman Hall, which was associated with a fetishized notion of Native American culture. In early 1938, an effort was made by the American

²² “‘Red Squad’ Head Quizzes Student,” *Oregonian*, October 26, 1937.

²³ American Defenders Meeting Report, December 4, 1937, George E. Rennar Papers.

²⁴ It is unclear whether “Legion” here describes the American Legion or the Silver Legion; however the former is more likely. *Radical Activities Bulletin*, Americans Incorporated. Portland, Oregon. No. 14, March 11, 1938.

²⁵ *Radical Activities Bulletin*, Americans Incorporated. Portland, Oregon. No. 14, March 11, 1938.

²⁶ David Robinson, Preliminary Organization Report, October 17, 1941, George E. Rennar Papers.

²⁷ See “Fascist Party,” *Portland Voter*, July 30, 1938; “Nazi Organization in United States” *Salem Capital Press*, April 7, 1939;

Defenders to unite the right as they announced the emergence of an “Americanization Council,” joining twenty-one far-right “patriotic organizations” throughout Portland, including “the German Folksbund and the K.K.K.”²⁸ Many of the groups listed were relatively small, and there is little evidence that the Americanization Council ever coalesced.

The use of Redman Hall as a meeting place provides a link to a timeless white “celebration” of indigenous cultures, to which they often ascribed indigenous “anti-modern” cultural modalities that borrowed from other forms of colonialist ideologies such as Orientalism, the Western re-interpretation of Eastern religions through an inaccurate and racialist framework.

And it could be easily appropriated for extremist ends; indeed, the fetishization of indigeneity and the representation of an archetypal human community lay at the roots of the fascist desire for a rebirth of their own mythical, ancestral community, whether Nordic or Italian or “100% American.”²⁹

Among the Bund's allies was the eccentric Portland attorney Elwood A. Towner, a member of the Siletz nation who had attended the Indian school at Chemawa. Calling himself “Chief Red Cloud,” Towner regularly attended both Silver Legion and Bund meetings, a matter that was facilitated by the German Government’s determination that Indians were a part of the Aryan race.³⁰ Towner’s chief grievance was against the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, or Wheeler-Howard Act, which he denounced as “Jewish communism pure and simple.”³¹ Towner contributed to the rise of fascist rhetoric and ideology by asserting, “This country and the government was built on Indian philosophy and Christianity and the time is coming when Indians and all Christian people will be united in one cause against Jewish communism and all the other isms of Satan.”³²

The Warm Springs tribe of Central Oregon went to special lengths to

²⁸ American Defenders Meeting Report, January 8, 1938, George Rennar Papers. Fred Gifford had revived the Klan in 1937, claiming that the primary focus was to fight both “communism and fascism in this country” and to keep the U.S. “safe for the democratic principles that made it great.” “Klan Revival Due in Oregon, Gifford Says,” *Oregon Journal*, October 19, 1937.

²⁹ Roger Griffin. “The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 1 (2002): 21-43.

³⁰Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends: The Third Reich’s Supporters in the United States* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 59-60; Vine Deloria and Clifford M. Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 180

³¹ Letter to John Bird Earrings December 27th, 1938, George E. Rennar Papers.

³² *Ibid.*

state that Towner did not speak for them.³³ Law enforcement officials attempted to discredit him, one informant alleging that Towner had a wife and 13-year-old son living on the Umatilla reservation, both sick with syphilis.³⁴ His previous wife, Maude Craig Hayes, told investigators that he worked directly with the Silver Legion and “kept her as a prisoner in Portland with bodyguards so that she could not escape.” Although white people often cherished Towner’s contributions, she stated, he had no support from the indigenous community.³⁵

That was probably an overstatement. Towner worked with the American Indian Federation, which Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle describe as providing the “most vocal” of Native American opposition to the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), which had been proposed by John Collier, Roosevelt’s head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The New Deal policy attempted to revive tribal self-government and put a value on Native American culture, but its turnabout from the individualistic emphasis of the Dawes Act created dissension on some reservations, most famously among the Navajo.³⁶ The American Indian Federation consistently attacked the Indian Reorganization Act as communistic and anti-Christian, and for that reason anti-New Deal opponents of the IRA were happy to provide them a forum to criticize Collier and Roosevelt at Congressional hearings. Towner took this tendency of the organization and transformed it into antisemitism, denouncing Collier as a “Jew-loving Pink Red,” and accusing Roosevelt of being a secret Jew.³⁷ It is not surprising that he would have been welcomed in the white supremacist circles of the Bund and Silver Shirts in the Northwest.

More central to the intensification of antisemitism and to the rise of the postwar religious extreme right was the eccentric body of thought known as British-Israelism, which asserted that Anglo-Saxons were the true genetic descendants of Biblical Hebrews and that the Jews in their midst were either Khazar “Asiatics,” or had their origins in a rebellion against the divine commandment not to intermarry with “Edomites.” In either case, the genetic bearers of the divine covenant, a chosen people, were Anglo-Saxon and not Jewish. The ideas as they were formulated in the late

³³ “Warm Springs Tribe Repudiates Towner,” *Morning Oregonian*, March 20, 1939.

³⁴ Informant Report on Towner, May 11, 1939, George E. Rennar Papers.

³⁵ Police Informant Letter About Elwood Towner, May 27, 1939, George E. Rennar Papers.

³⁶ On the complex sources of the Navajo conflict with Collier, see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 212-314.

³⁷ Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*, 180.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries supported a sense of Anglo-American mission in the world and subsequently they would become one of the most important foundational sources of the racist Christian Identity religion, which would move beyond the genetic arguments proffered by the proponents of British-Israelism to argue that Jews were the spawn of Satan. William Cameron, who had edited the *Dearborn Independent* in the 1920s while it was still publishing its series on the menace of “The International Jew,” would serve as the organization’s president in the 1930s, providing a strong link between the movement and antisemitism. In the 1930s, Cameron would lecture on the Bible as a “racial book,” which told the story of the Anglo-Saxon race.³⁸

The connections with fascist white supremacy run deep in Oregon. The leading lecturer for the Ku Klux Klan, Reuben Sawyer, had lectured on British-Israel principles while serving as a pastor at Portland’s Eastside Christian Church in the years prior to the rise of the Klan, and had played an active role in the formation of the British-Israel World Federation in 1919 and 1920, helping to draft the organization’s constitution and attending its first congress in 1920 in London, a matter covered by the *Oregonian*. On tying his fortunes to the Klan, Sawyer assumed that it would serve the interests of the British-Israel movement—a mistake that proved divisive within the B-I community and particularly with A. A. Beauchamp, the Boston-based editor of the *Watchman of Israel* who found the viciousness of Klan antisemitism and racism distasteful. Nonetheless, Sawyer remained active in British-Israel circles after his affiliation with the Klan came to an end in 1924. In the 1930s, leadership of the organization would pass into new hands.³⁹ It was during this period that B-I made the shifts necessary to degenerate further into the later Christian Identity movement, which we will discuss later in this article.⁴⁰

In the 1930s, British-Israel gospel became one of the mythic origin stories that were told amongst the gatherings of the fascist right, and spread throughout the network of organizations that appeared in Oregon in the 1930s. Speakers like Fred Johnson, the president of the Oregon branch of the Anglo-Saxon Federation of America, a British-Israel organization, found eager audiences in the halls open to the fascists. In the halls as well

³⁸ Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*, revised edition (UNC Press, 1997), 22-26 and 31-40.

³⁹ Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 22-26; Lawrence M. Lipin, “Reexamining the Oregon Klan in the Age of Trump: True Believers and Fellow Travelers,” Common Knowledge, Pacific University, <https://commons.pacificu.edu/ashist/1/>.

⁴⁰ Martin Durham, *White Rage: The extreme right and American politics* (New York, Routledge, 2007), 67.

on radio, Johnson spoke on themes that had tied the right together since the heyday of the Klan, including “Masonic History,” “Pyramid Symbolism” (a particular obsession of William Pelley’s), “Racial Origins,” and “Israel Truths.”⁴¹ Such stories reinforced each other as a culture of mythic origins and spiritual meanings spread among these groups, particularly the Silver Legion. An intelligence memo from the archived files of the Anti-Defamation League in 1936 explained that Johnson’s talk “seemed very much like the mouthings of William Dudley Pelley.”⁴²

After the attack on Pearl Harbor and a series of congressional hearings on domestic fascism, the isolationist movement, which fought the U.S. entry into the war, became a conduit for fascists to launder their reputations. Like anti-Communism, isolationism could be a way to support European fascism. In 1942, Delmore Lessard, a former Silver Shirt, anointed himself the head of Oregon’s anti-interventionist America First Committee, disseminating pamphlets produced by the publisher responsible for the *Nachrichten*.⁴³ Lessard parlayed his isolationist bona fides into the post-war era by linking up with Senator Rufus C. Holman, a former Klansman and supporter of the Bund’s anti-boycott campaign, to create the anti-Zionist group, American Foundation, Inc., in 1947. Six years earlier, Senator Holman had told his fellow lawmakers:

I have always deplored Hitler’s ambitions as a conqueror. But he broke the control of these internationalists over the common people of Germany. It would be a good idea if the control of the international bankers over the common people of England was broken, and good if it was broken over the wages and savings of the common people of the United States.⁴⁴

Some refused to make any accommodation to war-time fervor. Particularly active in supporting the cause of Japanese internment, Silver Shirts leader Henry L. Beach submerged his fascist activities in what he discreetly called the “Research Group,” through which he hoped to

⁴¹ Business card for G. Fred Johnson, Lecturer, George E. Rennar Papers.

⁴² Memo, April 21d, 1936, George E. Rennar Papers.

⁴³ David Robinson (Reporter), Preliminary Organization Report, Oct 17 1941, George E. Rennar Papers.

⁴⁴ “Wheeler, Holman Scored as Injecting Anti-Semitism in Lend-Lease Debate,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 6, 1941. <https://www.jta.org/1941/03/06/archive/wheeler-holman-scored-as-injecting-anti-semitism-in-lend-lease-debate>; For Holman’s solidarity with the Bund, see Meeting notes, March 24, 1934, George E. Rennar Papers.

organize “ten thousand armed people in Portland.”⁴⁵ For arguing in favor of a fascist invasion of the US in 1942, Beach faced expulsion from the West Coast, which was under intense scrutiny by the military. However, he managed to remain through the duration of the war.

The defeat of the fascist regimes embittered those U.S. far-right groups that had attempted to coalesce during the inter-war period, but they soldiered on largely in opposition to the perceived Communist threat. In the process, they shifted from a state-defending ultra-nationalism to a state-subverting ultra-nationalist movement. By 1951, a new group based in Los Angeles called America Plus, Inc., had emerged from various factions of the far right. A distinguished retired Marine officer, Pedro del Valle, who claimed to have known Mussolini “personally and served with his forces in Ethiopia,” hoped America Plus would endorse his “Minutemen” idea that would “have a semi-military purpose in checking the violence and sabotage, which the enemy constantly perpetrates in our country.” America Plus proved receptive, but demanded absolute secrecy. To stem the tide of the “one-worlders” and “internationalists,” del Valle went on to form a new group called the Defenders of the American Constitution with other retired military officers.⁴⁶

Influenced by del Valle’s paranoid ideas and a California paramilitary group called The Rangers, far-right ideologue Robert DePugh and friends formed a secret militant group called The Minutemen to prepare for a Communist assault on the contiguous lower-48 states in 1960. They claimed tens of thousands of members, though the FBI estimated The Minutemen’s national membership at 400-1,000.⁴⁷ Silver Shirts and Klansmen joined the vigilante Minutemen, which went on to blow up a police station in Redmond, Washington, a thriving hub for regional Silver Shirts during the interwar period.⁴⁸ The group also plotted to blow up

⁴⁵ Alphabetical List of Individuals, HIA-R, Barnhart Collection, N-5D-3-125-7, p. 11, <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/images/Collections/78006/HIA-R-BARNHART-EDWARD-N-5D-3-125-7.pdf>.

⁴⁶ See letter exchange between del Valle to Irvin Borders of America Plus, sent August 14, 1951, and a response from American Plus via Aldrich Blake sent October 3, 1951. Regarding his claim about Mussolini, see de Valle’s letter sent August 9, 1962 and addressed to National States Rights Party organizer J. Paul Thornton. Pedro Del Valle papers, 1949-1978, University of Oregon Libraries, Coll 126. These sources are included in an excellent summary of del Valle’s work, which can be found in Kevin Coogan, *The Defenders of the American Constitution and the League of Empire Loyalists: The First Postwar Anglo-American Revolts against the “One World Order,”* a paper delivered at Amsterdam International Institute for Social History, 2004.

⁴⁷ Steward A. Wright. 2007. *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 58-61.

⁴⁸ Silver Shirts built a “Silver Lodge” in Redmond and congregated there during the

Redmond's City Hall, rob four banks, and assassinate Martin Luther King, Jr., with 1,400 pounds of stolen dynamite before the FBI caught up to them in January 1968.⁴⁹

In this environment, former Silver Shirts moved older myths in more paranoid directions, transforming the optimistic imperialism of British-Israelism into the angrier denial of the humanity of Jews and other minorities. The shifts in British-Israelism began back in the 1930s when the hatred of Jews overwhelmed its emphasis on British heritage, partly due to the influence of former Klan leaders and fascists. Antisemitic mythology crystalized within British-Israelism when its leaders located Jews outside of the "tribes of Judah," instead identifying them as a defiled Edomite race. The religion continued this path of radicalization, creating a series of arcane readings of the Bible that told an alternative racialized history of the Israelites whose spiritual battles are framed in terms of racial survival. By the 1960s, it had evolved into the apocalyptic Christian Identity religion, which promoted revolutionary violence.⁵⁰ Silver Shirts like John Metcalf, who experienced Pelley's spiritualism as uplifting, joined the post-war Christian Identity movement associated with another former Silver Shirt named Richard G. Butler and his Church of Jesus Christ-Christian of the Aryan Nations. Hence, Christian Identity built on British-Israel origin stories to promote white supremacy, but considered Jews the spawn of Satan and all non-whites "mud people."⁵¹

In 1969, Silver Shirt leader and Research Group founder, Henry L. Beach, worked with The Rangers' founder and Christian Identity leader, William Potter Gale, to establish the virulently antisemitic Posse Comitatus in Portland. Advocating vigilante anti-Semitism, Posse Comitatus foregrounded the sovereignty of local sheriffs, repudiating the authority of federal agencies. In an interview with the *Oregonian*, Beach recalled that the Silver Legion had been "a very spiritual group," and that

1930s. See McNamara, N. and "Temple For 'American Hitler' Once Stood In Redmond: Knute Berger," Redmond Patch, May 29, 2018, <https://patch.com/washington/redmond/temple-american-hitler-once-stood-redmond-knute-berger>. See also Silver Shirt Legion of America, Washington State Division photograph collection, circa 1930s, PH1521, University of Washington Libraries, <http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv84258>.

⁴⁹ James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 57. See also, "7 ARE CONVICTED IN PLOT ON COAST: Guilty of Conspiring to Rob Banks for Minutemen," New York Times, June 23, 1968.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 236-241.

⁵¹ See Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 199-254.

Pelley wielded extraordinary metaphysical powers, claiming that “Pelley taught me to communicate with the spirit world.”⁵² From those origins, Posse Comitatus rapidly became the prototype for the “militia movement” in the 1970s, concentrating working-class, rural resentment against what they labeled an encroaching federal government captured by outside influences, often assumed to be Jewish or of a competing, usually-Communist nation. When Butler created a compound on Hayden Lake north of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, under the auspices of the “Aryan Nations” in 1973, it quickly became a hub for the most extreme members of Posse Comitatus, as well as Klansmen and other fascists bent on race war across Oregon and Washington.⁵³ By the mid-70s, Beach was openly admonishing recruits to “[n]ever let it be known how many members you have.... Not knowing how many of you there are, makes the TRAITORS more afraid of the influence you have.”⁵⁴

Beach’s paranoia exhibited the general characteristics of prior generations of far-right activists, from the Klan’s idea of a secretive “invisible empire” to the nativist tendency to focus rage foremost on traitors and subversives who sap the inner strength of the nation. Although Posse Comitatus faltered at the decade’s end, it returned to prominence in the early-1980s by instrumentalizing rural disenfranchisement stemming from the farm crisis in the Midwest, connecting it to Richard Butler’s calls for a white homeland in the Pacific Northwest.⁵⁵ Butler’s Aryan Nations compound, then, became a center for the growing revolutionary fascist movements in the Pacific Northwest that would engage in organized crime and assassinations throughout the 1980s.⁵⁶

Beach’s prominence within the inter-war Silver Shirts and his creation of the Posse Comitatus helps cast light on how deeply the Oregon inter-war fascist movement came to influence the post-war “white power” movement. While maintaining its populist economic message, Oregon’s far-right evolved from a broad-based nativism to the militant “white power” movement. Part of this move toward the identity of whiteness instead of an ethnically defined Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and “100% American” nationalism took place as a result of coalition-forming

⁵² Quoted in Toy, “Silver Shirts in the Northwest,” 144.

⁵³ Kathy Marks, *Faces of Right Wing Extremism* (Boston, MA: Branden Books, 2011), 85, 139.

⁵⁴ Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004).

⁵⁵ Carolyn Gallaher, “On the Fault Line: Race, Class and the US Patriot Movement,” *Cultural Studies*, 16:5 (2002): 673-703.

⁵⁶ Timothy G. Baysinger, “Right-wing Group Characteristics and Ideology.” *Homeland Security Affairs* 2, Article 3 (July 2006).

organizing among ethnic nationalists from Italy and Germany in support of fascism. This new “white nationalism” replaced the religious, moralistically inclined nativism of the 1920s Klan and earlier movements through a strategic adaptation to the conditions of the New Deal and then World War II. Christian Identity took on a much more revolutionary character by the 1970s and 1980s than the earlier British-Israelism had during its life, reframing the story of supposed Anglo-Saxon diaspora portrayed as the “lost tribes of Israel” in eschatological terms, where racial enemies (Jews) and subordinates (non-whites) were seen as enemy combatants in a spiritual war that justified violence amid Armageddon.⁵⁷ Likewise, Posse Comitatus found a new form of organizing and narrative for rural discontent, one that was revolutionary since it saw the federal government as illegitimate and captured by alien interests. For both of these movements, the shift in ideological intensity and praxis comes along with a shift in larger social conditions as a result of the Civil Rights movement.⁵⁸

The new “white nationalist” or “white power” movement in the post-war period defined itself by a more revolutionary strategy, a more inclusive understanding of whiteness, and a belief that the U.S. government is fully captured by enemy interests. While fascist and nativist movements often relied on extra-judicial vigilante violence before the Second World War, they often maintained a more complicated relationship with the state, since vigilante violence often helped shore up existing power structures. With major socio-economic shifts involving Civil Rights, de-industrialization, and globalization, the federal government appeared to abandon its earlier nativist principles. Thus, the “white power” movement and its explicit reliance on revolutionary vigilantism tilted against the state just as much as against minority targets.⁵⁹ Whether exploiting the economic crisis of returning Vietnam veterans or disenfranchised farmers moving West during the early-1980s, the growing “white power” movement continued to contend with the radical left to build a base among people subjected to dire economic conditions and the dissolution of community bonds through changes in the

⁵⁷ George Michael, *Theology of Hate: A History of the World Church of the Creator* (Gainesville, University of Press of Florida, 2009), 49-50.

⁵⁸ Aaron Winter (2011), ‘Posse Comitatus’, *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict*, ed. J. I. Ross, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 575-580.

⁵⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 106-17.

economic geography of the U.S..⁶⁰

In these conditions a new form of thinking became hegemonic in the fascist movement, focused on the creation of an entirely new state or type of society rather than simply making profound reforms to the existing one. This is where the term “white nationalist” emerged from, which tries to distinguish itself from white supremacy by defining itself as the ideological pursuit of white political sovereignty and social separation from non-whites.⁶¹ The interwar period of fascist movements helped to bridge the nativism of the Klan with the hyper-focus on racial purity found in the white power movement by reframing the enemies in explicitly racial terms rather than just of competing cultures. This process de-emphasized things like the opposition to Catholicism and instead focused on anti-Communism, primarily because Communism focused on a form of social equality that would challenge their racial taxonomy.

Today, continued economic instability links the growth of Oregon’s far-right to the past, where largely rural and blue-collar areas of the state experience the resurgence of the Patriot militia movements, while “Independent Trumpist” organizations like Patriot Prayer and their Alt Right bedfellows bring fascism to bear again in cities like Portland.⁶² Such trends will only persist if economic prospects for rural Oregon stagnate, while left-wing social movements, which provide a narrative and strategy around mobilizing anti-chauvinistic responses to class experiences, remain isolated in urban areas.^{63,64}

⁶⁰ We refer to these by what Comparative Fascist Studies scholar Robert O. Paxton labels “mobilizing passions,” which are the driving facts that create revolutionary impulses in constituencies, such as economic or social upheavals and discontent. In this way, socialist organizations could speak to the economic conditions of rural workers in the same way that right-wing ones could, but a different pool of politicization was available because of the existing material conditions. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 41.

⁶¹ George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2016), 246. It should be noted that this distinction does not absolve white nationalists of the description of white supremacy, since their ideology is simply a particular strategic implementation of white supremacy. In this case, it is pursuing political separation motivated by their belief in their inherent supremacy.

⁶² Spencer Sunshine, “The Growing Alliance Between Neo-Nazis, Right Wing Paramilitaries and Trumpist Republicans,” *Colorlines*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/growing-alliance-between-neo-nazis-right-wing-paramilitaries-and-trumpist-republicans>.

⁶³ Spencer Sunshine, Interview with Shane Burley, December 12, 2016.

⁶⁴ The authors want to thank Larry Lipin for substantial editorial assistance. This is an expanded version of an essay published in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. Shane Burley and Alexander Reid Ross, “From Nativism to White Power: The Interwar Fascist Movement in Oregon,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019).