

THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL OF BOSTON COLLEGE

## THE DEMON OF THE BELFRY

INVESTIGATING THE EVOLUTION OF THE PENNY PRESS AND THE EMMANUEL CHURCH MURDERS

### ALSO FEATURING

- *The Digital Pandemic*
- *The Force on the Front*



## THE FORCE ON THE FRONT

### *Analyzing the Police Sympathy for the Christian Front Movement in Brooklyn from 1938-1940*

SIOBHAN PENDER

POLICE INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN FRONT MOVEMENT IN BROOKLYN, NY GREW UNNOTICED FROM 1938-1940, RESULTING IN ANTI-SEMITIC VIOLENCE EVEN AFTER THE POLICE COMMISSIONER AND MAYOR WERE FORCED TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE AFTER THE ARREST IN 1940 OF 17 CHRISTIAN FRONT MEMBERS ACCUSED OF PLANNING TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. THE CHRISTIAN FRONT WAS ABLE TO GROW IN AN AREA LIKE BROOKLYN DUE TO ITS HIGH POPULATION OF IRISH-CATHOLICS, AND SINCE THE CHRISTIAN FRONT WAS A RELIGIOUSLY-BASED ANTI-SEMITIC GROUP LED BY AN IRISH CATHOLIC PRIEST, THESE PEOPLE ALIGNED WELL WITH THE MOVEMENT'S BELIEFS. WITH A LARGE IRISH-CATHOLIC POLICE FORCE, IT IS EVIDENT THAT THE POLICE NOT ONLY HAD MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHRISTIAN FRONT BUT ALSO THOSE SYMPATHETIC TO THE MOVEMENT. THE STRONGHOLD OF THE CHRISTIAN FRONT AND THE ANTI-SEMITIC BELIEFS PREVALENT THROUGHOUT THE NYPD RESULTED IN THE CREATION OF AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE ANTI-SEMITIC ATTACKS COULD PROLIFERATE UNADDRESSED, AND WHERE IRISH CATHOLIC NATIONALISTS COULD SPREAD AND IMPOSE THEIR BELIEFS OF ANTI-SEMITISM AND THROUGH THEIR POSITIONS OF POWER IN A LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLE.

## INTRODUCTION

There is significant evidence of police membership in the Christian Front in the 1930s and 40s in New York City and largely in the borough of Brooklyn, drawing on support from the sizable Irish Catholic population of this area and the enticing leadership of Irish Catholic Priest Father Coughlin (Milner, 1971). The legacy of the CF and of Father Coughlin on the national level was strongly shaken with the 1940 arrest of seventeen Brooklyn-based members, after the FBI discovered their terror plot created to destroy Jewish businesses, blow up areas of New York, and assassinate members of Congress; however, in Brooklyn there still remained strong support from their Irish-Catholic members (Vials, 2014). In this paper, I would like to argue that upon an examination of primary documents such as newspapers from the time of the 1940 FBI arrest of CF radicals as well as other scholarly works on police and radical groups, the Christian Front was able to grow in popularity in Brooklyn due to its population of Irish-Catholics and large participation in the police force. Therefore policemen held these anti-Semitic beliefs and potential CF membership at the time. This fact is further emphasized by the lack of police action against the many anti-Semitic attacks, especially from Irish gangs, as well as



CHARLES COUGHLIN, LEADER OF THE CHRISTIAN FRONT  
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

the tendency for the police to not address those accused of CF membership in their ranks, even after the 1940 FBI raid and arrest of the radical Christian Fronters in Brooklyn.

## IRISH CATHOLIC AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

It is important to consider the cultural background of the people who made up the CF group in NYC. There are connections between the fascist movement in Ireland and similar beliefs being held by Irish-Americans in the Brooklyn borough. These beliefs were similarly espoused by the CF, so it is no surprise that a large part of their membership was Irish Americans who likely grew up in this ideology which had ingrained in it an inherent refusal to distinguish between Communists and Jews and denouncing both groups. The Christian Front was a religious organization with a largely Irish Catholic membership base, which enabled the large population of Irish-Catholic Americans in Brooklyn during the 20th century to drive the membership of the CF in this area. As Fein notes in his work, “[a]nother important aspect of the membership of the Christian Front was that it was a religiously based organization, led by an Irish Catholic priest. As was the case with so much of the CF’s ideology, its religiously-based anti-Semitism derived directly from Coughlin and his program of social justice,” making it an organization with a religious basis for its anti-Semitism (Fein, 2009).

## THE ROLE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Catholic anti-Semitism, especially from Irish Catholics, grew from the deicide accusation of the Jews being responsible for Jesus’ death that was propagated by priests and nuns in Catholic schools and churches for centuries; this sentiment became increasingly severe during the 1930s, which resulted in a dangerous environment for Jews in the Northeast, where heavily Catholic populations resided, such as in Brooklyn, NY (Norwood, 2003). In New York City during the time of WWII, Irish Catholic youths terrorized Jews in the streets. This was inspired by the Christian Front and its anti-Semitic gangs, which had a “deliberate policy of provoking violence against the Jews” (Norwood, 2003). “Young Christian Front hoodlums in the German, Irish and Italian communities were fond of Jew-bashing,” and the areas in New York in which these assaults of Jews occurred the most were known to be heavily Irish American neighborhoods, and the Christian Front was considered to be made up of almost entirely all Irish and Catholic individuals (Murray, 2018).

Even before the arrest, the police were accused of being hesitant to reply to anti-Semitic hate crimes or assaults. The culture surrounding Irish-Americans' reluctance to act, and even their voicing of anti-Semitic rhetoric and committing violence against Jewish people, was already established prior to the rise of the Christian Front and the subsequent Irish— and police— involvement. Therefore, this anti-Semitic behavior did not just simply dissipate following the 1940 arrest of CF radicals, even as the CF nationally lost its credibility due to its association with a terrorist group. They remained prevalent in the populations of Irish Catholics in Brooklyn who still held the same sentiments promoted by the Front.

In New York, a significant number of policemen were Christian Front members or sympathizers, which resulted in a general disinterest in protecting the safety of Jews who were being attacked in the streets by these anti-Semitic, Christian Front gangs. According to a *New York Post* columnist Victor Riesel, the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had supplied Mayor LaGuardia with a list of 1,500 policemen who had applied to be members of the Christian Front, which the city government never took disciplinary action against (Norwood, 2003). Some of the Jewish merchants who had been picketed by Christian Fronters had reached out to New York Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine to ask for police help against these anti-Semitic harassment, but perhaps due to the fact that nearly two thirds of New York's policemen were Irish-Americans who may have held anti-Semitic sentiments, the merchants were told that the police could not help in preventing "peaceful picketing" (Norwood, 2003). Additionally, Mayor LaGuardia viewed the anti-Semitic "incidents" in New York as "sporadic and unorganized," and therefore the police remained unsympathetic to calls to take action to stop the violence; it was even reported that the New York police would often describe acts of anti-Semitic vandalism as "boyish pranks" rather than actual crimes, diminishing the significance of the threat to Jewish people in NYC (Norwood, 2003).

*"In New York, a significant number of policemen were Christian Front members or sympathizers, which resulted in a general disinterest in protecting the safety of Jews who were being attacked in the streets by these anti-Semitic, Christian Front gangs."*

#### THE 1940 FBI ARREST AND THE POLICE REACTION

The 1940 FBI arrest notably sparked questions about the other members of the Christian Front organization, which in turn led to the quest for police members either sympathetic to or participating in the CF. This sympathetic nature of the police had enabled the CF to grow and proliferate in the 1930s since its population included Irish Catholic nationalists. Ten of the arrested Christian Front members in 1940 were Irish-Americans, who the FBI believed imitated Irish Republican Army (IRA) techniques in manufacturing explosives. The federal government's arrest of these activists on charges of conspiring to overthrow the US government and steal ammunition from a National Guard armory did not significantly undermine the support for this group in Irish Catholic neighborhoods. In fact, anti-Semitism continued to increase there, even as Coughlin and his Christian Front began to decrease in nationwide popularity (Norwood, 2003).

The public pressure following the 1940 arrest to address the question of whether NYPD members were part of the Christian Front required the Mayor and the Commissioner to take action. As noted in the 1940 newspaper article from the *Daily Worker*, "[r]eacting to persistent demands that the Police Department be probed for existence of cells of the terrorist Christian Front, Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine yesterday ordered all cops in the city to state whether they were ever connected with the Front or the Nazi Bund." The Police Commissioner Valentine ordered the distribution of a questionnaire to all policemen in the force, asking them to answer about their political habits, for the first time addressing the public demands to search out for subversive activity within the force. As noted by Gene Fein in his dissertation, "[t]he arrest of the [Christian] Fronters [in NYC] gave Mayor LaGuardia enough political currency to address the charges of police laxity in anti-Semitic matters that plagued his office since 1938...The mayor ordered investigations commissioner William Herlands to investigate police membership in the

Christian Front” (Fein, 2006). While almost all but a few of the policemen filled out this questionnaire, “Fronters denied that membership interfered with the ability of police officers to do their jobs. They said it should make no difference to the city what police officers’ activities were while off-duty” (Fein, 2006). When it was reported that the New York Fire Department had firemen with membership in the Christian Front, this sentiment was similarly echoed by Fire Commissioner John J. McElligott who was quoted as saying:

*‘What laws are being violated by being members of these organizations, including the Christian Front? I hold no brief for anti-Semitism or anti-religious groups, but a fireman’s first job is to be a good fireman, and his second is to be a good citizen. If he is both, and violates no laws, I am not inquiring into anything else.’ (Norwood, 2003)*

This statement is very similar to the words of the Fronters who opposed the distribution of the survey amongst the police department, which demonstrates the reluctance of the leaders of the police and fire department to identify and investigate radicals within their forces.

The intention of the questionnaire that Mayor LaGuardia ordered was “chiefly for the protection of the men themselves,” so that they could disprove the accusations that the police force had a large number of officers that were also Christian Front members. The Mayor asserted that the questionnaire would demonstrate that police in the Christian Front are “few and far between,” and that those who did join or had filed for membership applications did so under the assumption that it was for a religious or fraternal



GERMAN AMERICAN BUND RALLY, NEW YORK, MADISON SQUARE GAREN, FEBRUARY 1939 (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

organization (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1940). The motivation for the distribution of the questionnaire resulted from an inquiry from the year before, “when word reached Mayor LaGuardia and Mr. Valentine that one patrolman had boasted that several Manhattan precincts were “controlled by Christians” and they were “getting rid of all the Jews” in those precincts (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1940). The decision to investigate these statements from the patrolman came after organizations in NYC interested in combatting anti-Semitism and racial prejudice protested to the Mayor and the Commissioner of long previous inaction on the part of the police to address anti-Semitism.

In New York City and in Boston, it was shown that a large proportion of the police force was made up of followers, and not necessarily declared members, of the revolutionary Christian Front (Ziff, 1944). As noted in the *Daily Worker* 1940 newspaper article, “[t]he Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights charged last month that 40 members of the Police Department were members of the Christian Front. Valentine said they know who are the members of the Christian front,” and that there is an ongoing investigation (*Daily Worker*, 1940). From the survey sent out, “[o]nly twenty-seven admitted to being members of the Christian Front at the time of the survey, although 407 admitted having been members in the past. Most claimed to have joined the Front because they thought it was a religious organization. All previous members had voluntarily quit before the questionnaire was sent out” (Fein, 2006). The ideals and goals of the radical anti-Semitic group were held by many officers, evidenced by either their previous membership within the CF or by their lack of action in addressing anti-Semitic incidents.

Not only were police criticized for their overall inaction to address anti-Semitic attacks, but also the police force was accused of ignoring and disregarding Christian Front membership in their force, even after the 1940 FBI arrest. The Mayor and the Police Commissioner were publicly criticized in one of these articles from 1943 for not condemning the police officer James L. Drew who was accused of subversive activities, including anti-Semitic affiliations, three years after the FBI arrest. This clearance was met with opposition and disapproval, as Corporation Counsel Deau Wilkinson concluded that Drew “should be found guilty and dismissed from the service.” Commissioner of Investigation William B. Herlands was another expert who concurred with the sentiment that Drew should be dismissed, and after hearing that Drew was cleared,

Herlands commented, “The Police Commissioner’s decision in the Drew case is a major defeat on the home front... in my opinion the Police Commissioner’s decision is contrary to the evidence and sound public policy. I am at a complete loss to understand the basis for his decision” (Margoshes, 1943).

Drew admitted to consorting with “the Jew-haters of the McWilliams outfit, with the fascists of the Christian Front, with Bundists of the Nazi persuasion” (Margoshes, 1943). Through his involvement in this fascist groups, he had in his possession “a great quantity of anti-Semitic and anti-American propaganda material,” further mounting the evidence against him for his involvement in these anti-Semitic organizations (Margoshes, 1943). After the exoneration of James Drew, Dr. Margoshes, editor of *The Day*, declared that Drew was only one of the many NYC police officers who held “subversive, anti-democratic, and anti-Semitic views,” even in the years following the distribution of the questionnaire regarding police involvement in subversive groups that was intended to seek out this membership (Margoshes, 1943). Such divisiveness and criticism of the police handling of the CF members within their organization reflects the sentiment that the lenient sentiment of the police enabled the CF to flourish and attract membership not only from the population of Brooklyn but also from within the police force itself.

#### DELAYED REACTION AND CRITICISMS

Police Commissioner Louis Valentine did not explain why the city government waited so long to seek out the subversives within the NYPD, but this delay was likely due to the nature of the police force and the prevalence of anti-Semitic sentiments in alignment with the movement of the Christian Front. The “Catholic supporters of the Christian Front expressed indignation. They complained that the survey was a violation of civil rights and demanded an apology from the mayor” (Fein, 2006). The questions

from the survey asked about their involvement in any “subversive” group, such as a Nazi, Fascist, or Communist organization, interestingly grouping fascism and communism together, as they were viewed during this time as opposing perspectives, but were associated together in this survey. From the *Daily Worker* in February 1940, the journalist noted that,

*“The Commissioner, however, failed to differentiate between the reactionary Front and Bund from the working class, the Communist party. He said his probe was aimed at the Christian Front, but the questionnaire sent out to 20,000 policemen to only asked if they were members of the Front, but also: “Have you ever been a member of any subversive, Communist, Bund and Fascist organization?” Linking of the word “Communist” with “Bund and Fascist,” a dangerous confusion, was seen as opening the way for a local police drive against not only Communists but other labor leaders under the pretext of fighting such subversive forces as Coughlinites and Nazi terror and anti-labor gangs.” (Daily Worker, 1940).*

Publications such as the *Brooklyn Tablet* deemed the questionnaire “the police inquisition” and considered it to be a hypocritical procedure due to the “known atheists, radicals and Communists” found in the city government. The mayor was oftentimes accused of being a communist, and Gene Fein notes in his dissertation, “[t]he questionnaire was viewed as part of LaGuardia’s plan to discredit the Front because officers who dropped out of the CF were forced to say they had left because it was a “subversive group.” When only twenty-seven policemen admitted to being Christian Fronters, the mayor, who was “surrounded by communists and a few phony Catholics,” immediately called for an investigation,” indicating his hypocrisy – as viewed by CF sympathizers – in cracking down on subversives within the police force but not his own government (Fein, 2006).

*“The questions from the survey asked about their involvement in any ‘subversive’ group, such as a Nazi, Fascist, or Communist organization, interestingly grouping fascism and communism together, as they were viewed during this time as opposing perspectives...”*

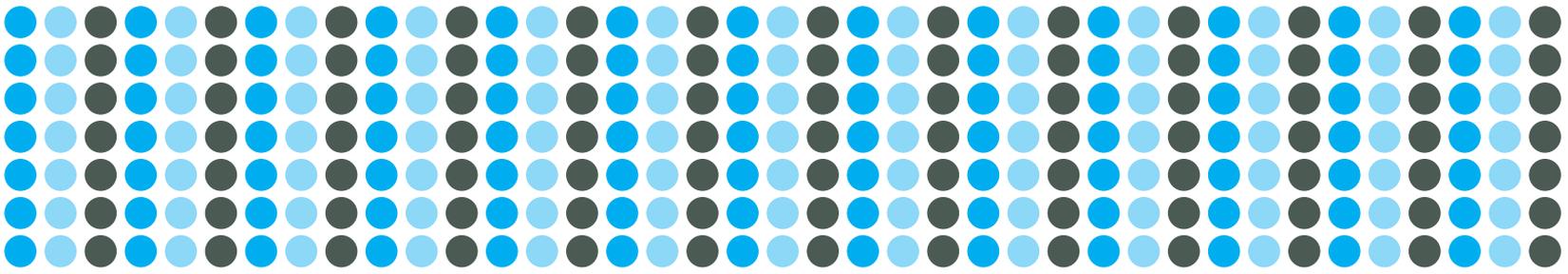
## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the police involvement in the Christian Front movement in Brooklyn, NY grew unnoticed, resulting in the proliferation of anti-Semitic violence in these regions, even after the Police Commissioner and Mayor were forced to address the issue after the arrest in 1940 of 17 Christian Front members accused of planning terrorist activities. The Christian Front was able to grow in an area like Brooklyn due to its high population of Irish-Catholics, and since the Christian Front was a religiously-based anti-Semitic group led by an Irish Catholic priest, these people aligned well with the movement's beliefs; it was here that the CF was able to garner and maintain strong support, even after a scandal such as the 1940 FBI arrest that otherwise discredited the group nationwide.

These facts are evidenced by the lack of police action to address anti-Semitic issues in NYC, in the times before the 1940 arrest of the CF radicals but also in the years after, as the beliefs did not dissipate with the downfall of Coughlin and the CF's national popularity due to their association with the terrorist group, but were maintained in areas with substantial Christian Front membership (Vials, 2014). The stronghold of the Christian Front and the anti-Semitic beliefs prevalent throughout the NYPD resulted in the creation of an environment where anti-Semitic attacks could proliferate unaddressed, and where Irish Catholic nationalists could spread their beliefs of anti-Semitism and impose them through their positions of power in a law enforcement role.

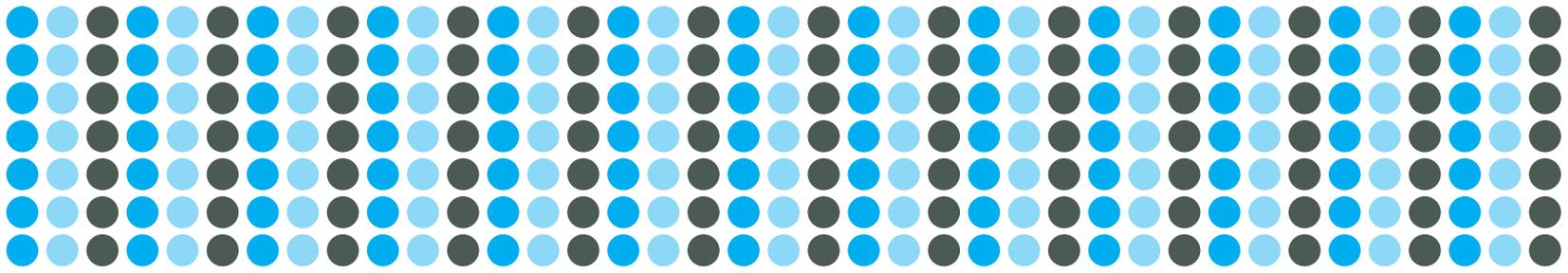
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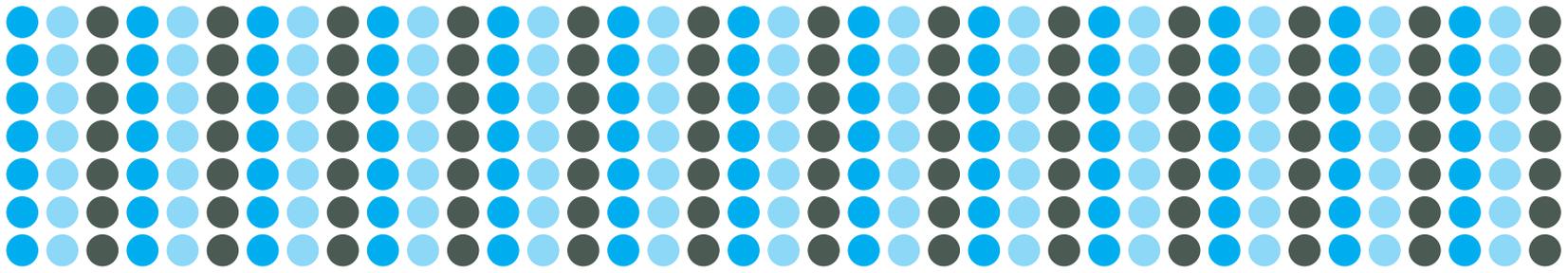
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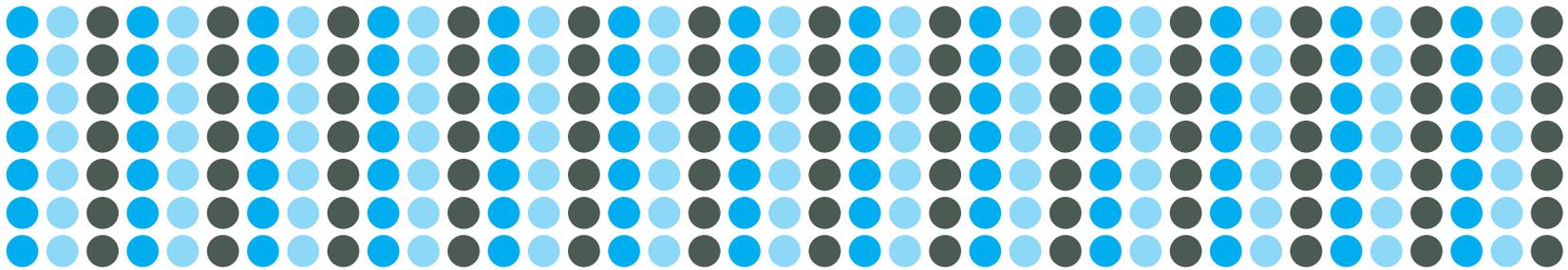
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## 100 GERMAN AMERICAN BUND RALLY, NEW YORK, MADISON SQUARE GAREN, FEB 1939

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