

## *In 1939, Nazis packed Madison Square Garden to celebrate George Washington's birthday*

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### NAZIS HAIL GEORGE WASHINGTON AS FIRST FASCIST



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**Birthday.** In Hackensack its members hired a hall, procured a picture of Washington, hung it beside the swastika. Highlight of the evening was a speech by the Rev. John C. Fitting, Bund official, hailing Washington as "the first

**Fascist"** and as a "realist" who knew democracy could not work. Bundsman Fitting praised Washington's courage, related by way of illustration that at 15 young George "rode a horse to death because the horse would not give in."

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It can happen here. It did happen here.

On Feb. 20, 1939, more than 20,000 Nazis packed Madison Square Garden for what was billed as a "pro-American" rally to celebrate George Washington's birthday. The rally took place just seven months before Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, launching the bloodiest war in history.

There had never been an event for Washington's birthday quite like this one. The backdrop behind the stage featured a towering 30-foot-tall image of George Washington, flanked by banners with both the American flag and Nazi swastikas. A singer performed the national anthem. The crowd recited the Pledge of Allegiance, inserting the word "undivided" before "allegiance to the flag." Uniformed storm troopers marched down the aisles, and everyone in the audience repeatedly raised their arms in the Nazi salute.

Outside, thousands of anti-fascist counterprotesters gathered. More than 1,500 police officers were deployed to keep the groups apart. A band from a Broadway show played the "Star Spangled Banner" for the counterprotesters.

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Footage from the Nazi rally was featured in *A Night at the Garden* (2017), directed by Marshall Curry, which was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Short in 2018. Take seven minutes to watch it, if you haven't yet seen it.

[Amerika 1939](#) <sup>1</sup>

In an interview on [the film's website](#), Curry said that he had never heard of the event until a friend mentioned it. The 2017 pro-Nazi, antisemitic "[Unite the Right](#)" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, gave him a sense of urgency about making the film. So Curry and a friend combed through film archives to assemble enough footage to put together the seven-minute documentary.

“The first thing that struck me was that an event like this could happen in the heart of New York City, a city that was diverse, modern, and progressive even in 1939. The second thing that struck me was the way these American Nazis used the symbols of America to sell an ideology that a few years later hundreds of thousands of Americans would die fighting against,” Curry said.

“It really illustrated that the tactics of demagogues have been the same throughout the ages. They attack the press, using sarcasm and humor. They tell their followers that they are the true Americans (or Germans or Spartans or ... ). And they encourage their followers to ‘take their country back’ from whatever minority group has ruined it.”



*Illustration 1: This poster for the Feb. 20 event billed itself as a “Mass Demonstration for True Americanism”*

The 1939 rally was sponsored by the pro-Nazi German American Bund (or Federation), which had thousands of members across the country. At its peak, the Bund held parades,

operated bookstores, and ran summer camps for youth. The Bund viewed George Washington as “the [first fascist](#),” and a “realist” who believed democracy would not work.

[James Wheeler-Hill](#), the Bund’s national secretary, audaciously declared at the rally: “If George Washington were alive today, he would be friends with Adolf Hitler.”

The Bund was openly pro-Nazi, but it did not exist in a vacuum. There were [some leading American companies](#) doing business in Nazi Germany, most notably Ford, IBM, and Standard Oil.

There was also a strong isolationist movement in the U.S. led by the [America First Committee](#) (AFC). The group opposed American aid to the Allies and advocated that the U.S. remain neutral in any European war.

This movement’s most visible spokesman was aviator Charles Lindbergh, who was openly antisemitic and sympathized with Nazi Germany. The committee had to remove the notorious antisemitic automaker Henry Ford from its board.

Much of the AFC’s funding came from millionaires such as General Robert E. Wood of Sears Roebuck and Chicago Tribune publisher Robert. R. McCormick. The group’s ranks included some young men who became future leaders, including President Gerald Ford, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, and the first Peace Corps director, Sargent Shriver. The AFC dissolved within days of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.





*Illustration 2: German-American Bund parade in New York City on East 86th St. Oct. 30, 1937*

At the 1939 Garden rally, the speakers offered a toxic mix of white supremacy and fascist ideology, covered with a veneer of American patriotism. Donald Trump, of course, would later appropriate the phrase “America First” into his 2016 presidential campaign. And as Daily Kos Community Fellow Dartagnan [noted in 2019](#):

The film shows that the tactics employed by demagogues, fascist or otherwise, have not appreciably changed over time. Every one of the characteristics of Donald Trump’s rallies is present in the film above: the same vicious denunciation of the press, the same appeals to patriotism and white nationalism, the same urging that the audience, the only “true” Americans, need to “take their country back” from a despised minority (just substitute “Illegals” or “liberals” for “Jewish” here).

The rally’s main speaker was [Fritz Julius Kuhn](#), the Bund’s leader and would-be Führer, a German immigrant who claimed he was present for Hitler’s failed 1923 Munich Beer Hall putsch.

Kuhn began his speech by welcoming the audience as “Ladies and gentlemen, fellow Americans, American patriots” before he decried the “Jewish controlled press” for depicting him as a villainous “creature with horns, a cloven hoof and a long tail.”

This drew laughter and applause from the crowd, but Kuhn's speech then took on a more ominous tone that, horrifyingly, could have been ripped from today's headlines.

"We, with our American ideas, demand that our government shall be returned to the American people who founded it," Kuhn said. "If you ask what we are actively fighting for under our charter, first, a socially just, white, Gentile-ruled United States. Second, Gentile-controlled labor unions, free from Jewish Moscow-directed domination."

Kuhn's speech was interrupted by a protester who rushed the stage, yelling "Down with Hitler!" He was then tackled and beaten—to the crowd's delight. The protester's pants were ripped off as police quickly intervened and took him into custody. He was later identified as Isadore Greenbaum, 26, a Jewish plumber from Brooklyn; he was fined \$25 for disturbing the peace.

After Pearl Harbor, Greenbaum enlisted in the Navy and rose to the rank of chief petty officer. In an [interview with Stars & Stripes](#), the U.S. military newspaper, Greenbaum said he sneaked into the rally and grew angrier and angrier as he listened to the explicitly antisemitic speeches—which included references to "job-taking Jewish refugees" and denunciations of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as "Rosenfeld."

"Gee, what would you have done if you were in my place listening to that SOB, hollering against the government and publicly kissing [Adolf] Hitler's behind while thousands cheered? Well, I did it." Greenbaum told Stars & Stripes.

Greenbaum and his family later moved to San Francisco, where he became a fisherman. He died in 1997.

Kuhn suffered a more ignominious fate. Mere months after the Garden rally, he was sent to prison after being convicted of forgery and larceny for embezzling Bund funds. His citizenship was later revoked and he was deported to Germany, where he was arrested first by U.S. occupation forces, and later by German authorities, who tried him as a major Nazi contributor. He served two years of a 10-year sentence and died in obscurity in 1951, while working as a chemist in Munich.

The German American Bund, which was founded in 1936 with support from the Hitler regime, specifically to spread Nazi ideology in the U.S., ended up on the ash heap of history. But the white supremacist ideology it championed remains.



*Illustration 3: Draketown, GA. - April 21: Members of the National Socialist Movement, one of the largest neo-Nazi groups in the US, hold a swastika burning after a rally on April 21, 20218, in Draketown, Georgia. Community members had opposed the rally in Newnan and came out to embrace racial unity in the small Georgia town. Fearing a repeat of the violence that broke out after Charlottesville, hundreds of police officers were stationed in the town during the rally in an attempt to keep the anti racist protesters and neo-Nazi groups separated. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty images)*

Filmmaker Curry told [Vox in an interview](#) that he wanted “to provoke people to think about our current times through the perspective of history.”

He noted that the Nazi rally at the Garden has largely been erased from people’s memories over the years. The short film was meant to challenge the assumption that in the lead-up to World War II, Americans were always and universally appalled by Nazi ideology.

“When you see 20,000 New Yorkers carrying swastika flags and cheering for Nazi ideas, you realize that things weren’t so clear back then,” Curry told Vox. “There was a significant minority of Americans who thought fascism and racism and anti-Semitism were okay.”

Curry also warned that people must learn from the lessons of the past, and cannot be complacent.

“If things are going to work out okay now, it’s going to be because of the efforts of people who push back on the anti-immigrant, antisemitic, anti-Muslim ideas that seem to be

creeping back in our country,” he said in the interview—way back in 2019.

“When you see the leader take the stage and attack the press, and tell the audience to take back America from the minorities who are destroying it—and then laugh and sneer when a protester is beaten up—this all feels very familiar,” Curry said. “And I hoped that when Trump supporters saw what this kind of behavior led to in 1939, it might make them more sensitive to it when they saw it today. And when casual Trump critics saw it, they might take the threat a little more seriously.”

It can happen here. It is happening here.

Source:

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2022/2/21/2081434/-The-night-American-Nazis-packed-Madison-Square-Garden-to-celebrate-George-Washington-s-birthday>

<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/237489146>  
<https://youtu.be/eq9yst4W-6c>