Inside the 'Christian Front'

by THEODORE IRWIN

American Council on Public Affairs
INSIDE THE ‘CHRISTIAN FRONT’

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Forty-eight hours after bombs exploded in two of London’s largest railway stations one day last summer, police picked up a “Liam Walsh” for questioning. A Dublin terrorist, he was identified as the mysterious “man with a slouch” present at the scene of one of the explosions. Strangely enough, Liam Walsh’s name reached Scotland Yard in a cable from the British consulate in New York. The consul, in turn, had received his information from a little group of men digging for the roots of the savage anti-Semitic movement in New York known as the Christian Front. The reference to Walsh was first picked up by undercover agents in a message to Christian Front headquarters in New York from the Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin.

Five months later, the Federal Bureau of Investigation pounced on seventeen members of a Christian Front “inner circle” and uncovered a fantastic little Putsch. Using Irish Republican Army techniques (down to similar methods of manufacturing explosives) this little group was accused of planning to bomb selected buildings, seize public utilities, blast bridges, terrorize Jews, appropriate Federal Reserve gold, assassinate fourteen Congressmen, and set up a dictatorship. These “Fronters,” almost half of whom were active or former members of the National Guard or other branches of the armed forces, were about to undergo a practice course in bombing. Among them were several natives of Ireland and Germany, a Nazi propagandist, and the national leader of the Christian Front.

Berlin — Dublin — New York. Considerably more than these symptoms point to international seats of infection for a festering boil on the neck of the nation — the most widely ramified hate movement since the ugliest days of the Ku Klux Klan. In New York, where it reached the most advanced stage, the new anti-Semitism has been a domestic storm-troop mob running amuck, spewing racial hatred, fomenting violence, staging street scenes never before witnessed in the city’s history. Composed chiefly of admirers of Charles E. Coughlin and sundry hoodlums, crackpots, misguided patriots, and Bundsters, the Christian Front and its shenanigans have taken on startling resemblances to early Nazism.

At its fountainhead, New Yorkers for more than a year have been subjected each week to an average of forty or fifty turbulent and vituperative Christian Front street meetings, at which crowds have been exhorted to liquidate the Jews in America. Bands of rowdies have roamed subways and streets insulting and assaulting Semitic-appearing men and women;
abusive stickers have been slapped on windows of Jewish shops; a “Christian Index” has been compiled for an organized boycott; and brawls have ended in close to 250 arrests and 120 convictions. Men were recruited for a private army. Unfriendly radio stations and sponsoring Jewish merchants were raucously picketed. Affection for Hitler and his policies was outspoken. Christian Front propaganda penetrated even the public schools, and several Jewish children were severely beaten by small-fry Streichers.

While outside New York what is known as the Christian Front is wholly a membership setup, perhaps affiliated with or screened by State Social Justice clubs and superpatriotic bodies, at headquarters it also serves the more ominous function of a loosely knit coalition acting for a score or more groups openly Fascist in sympathies. Circuit rabble rousers, as well as Social Justice — the Coughlin organ — boasted that by the end of 1940 Christian Front membership would reach five million. New York alone, it is estimated, now has some 12,000 rabid followers of the faith. Whatever its actual strength, the Front manifestly developed as the spearhead of the most unhealthy anti-Semitic drive this country has seen.

Full-blown in New York, the movement more recently has sprouted in key cities throughout the nation. Organization meetings of the Front, scheduled for the fall in many cities, became “neutrality” rallies when the arms-embargo issue arose. While “Keep Out of War” seemed to be the keynote, veiled references to “a certain racial group” began to creep into speeches, leading finally to outright attacks on “Jewish war mongers.” Most of these huge gatherings in city auditoriums featured the Royal Oak oracle delivering his stereotyped direct-by-telephone harangue. Anti-Semitic poison of the “Protocols of Zion” brand was brazenly sold at rallies. But in several cities attempts to hand out literature attacking Coughlinism were obstructed by “Fronters,” sometimes with bloodshed. Police clearly showed partiality to distributors of Social Justice. Rioting, however, outside New York City has been minor.

II

Invasion of New England proceeded under cover of a Committee for Defense of Constitutional Rights, organized in Boston over a year ago by Francis P. Moran, former insurance agent and a staunch apostle of the Royal Oak padre. Although metropolitan Boston is 85-per-cent Catholic, progress was retarded chiefly because Cardinal O’Connell is known to be cool to Coughlin. Nevertheless, the Christian Front felt strong enough last September to come out in the open in Boston with Moran as kingpin. Since then, units of
the Front have been formed in Arlington, Ayer, Belmont, Springfield, and Worcester, Massachusetts, and Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Last December, Social Justice reported that "in Worcester and Springfield plans are under way for the organization of riflemen's groups in units of 100 men each."

The big gun was fired in Boston on September 8, as six thousand people from various parts of Massachusetts and Rhode Island jammed Boston Arena to hear the Master's voice piped in. It was announced as a neutrality meeting, under the auspices of the Committee for Constitutional Rights, and no overt attack on Jews was made at the time. However, John F. Cassidy, young New York gas-company clerk, appeared on the platform, and was introduced to the audience as National Director of the Christian Front. Moran, presiding, announced: "This is not a Christian Front meeting. But, if you are interested in the Christian Front, as I am, come to Room 204 at the Copley Plaza."

Two weeks later, Fronters picketed Ford Hall, where Justice Felix Frankfurter was receiving a medal for meritorious citizenship. But the first frankly anti-Semitic note at a public meeting was sounded on October 22 at an assemblage of the Frontist "American Mothers Neutrality League." Moran, as master of ceremonies, pulled the "menace of communism" into his embargo speech and followed with a left hook at "Jewish leaders." Two days later, at a mass meeting, Moran and Cassidy made their anti-Semitic position definite. Singularly vicious attacks were made on Einstein and ex-Justice Brandeis. But Boston witnessed no such bloody clashes as New York's "Kill the Jew!" street scenes.

Philadelphia, on the other hand, is not far behind New York. Christian Front gatherings in the Quaker City, sometimes under the auspices of a Committee for Constitutional Rights or an Anti-Communism Society, inspired almost as much violence. Street fights were not uncommon. Synagogue windows were smashed, and members of Jewish men's clubs beaten. The West Philadelphia and Kensington sections particularly have been terrorized, swamped with anti-Semitic propaganda. A religious tolerance meeting at a Y.M.C.A. was stormed, and ended with thirteen arrests. These arrests were followed by a leaflet barrage alleging "Jewish persecution of innocent Christians." Threats were made to bomb the "Y" building unless a scheduled meeting of a women's peace league was canceled. Station WDAS, because it refused to carry Coughlin's broadcast, was picketed every Sunday for over a year. While the Front did not conduct outdoor soapbox harangues, a number of secret conclaves were held each week, and three huge mass meetings were staged during the year. Not long ago, an airplane showered the city with anti-Semitic leaflets. For a time, Fronters engaged in secret rifle practice.

The Philadelphia branch of the Front was
set up in July.—Coughlin delivered a direct-by-wire diatribe to a rally of six thousand people, and, soon after, Social Justice heralded the founding of branches in West Philadelphia, Mount Airy, Germantown, the Chesters, and Camden, New Jersey. As in New York's Harlem, an anti-Semitic movement among Negroes, operating behind the facade of a Friends Association for Social Justice, has been fostered by Coughlinites in Washington work through the United Gentile League, the creation of which was significant.

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Anti-Semitism in Washington has died, but the movement in Washington is alive. Many of the League's members are German. At a recent meeting of the League, one of its officers who had just returned from a visit to the Shrine in Washington, as well as Baltimore, reported that Coughlin expressed the wish that the Christian Front be established "for men only" and that the women form an auxiliary. The move is necessary, Coughlin is said to have explained, because to combat anti-Semitism, Communism must be combated. The move is necessary, Coughlin is said to have explained, because to combat anti-Semitism, Communism must be combated.

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Moving westward, Coughlinites staged their mightiest mobilization of the year in Cleveland on September 28, when more than 17,000 people choked both halls of the city auditorium, packed a theatre nearby, and overflowed into the street. The drawing card was the Great One in the flesh, greeted on his arrival with a valise full of coins and bills collected from the audience. Archbishop Joseph Schrembs, announced as the chairman, decided to stay away when he learned of the deeper implications of the meeting. To refute the charge that the Social Justice clubs were not in good standing with ecclesiastic authority, Dr. Edward Lodge Curran, of Brooklyn, President of the International Catholic Truth Society, recited the permission of his own superior, Bishop Molloy, and the expressed approval of Archbishop M. J. Curley of Baltimore; in St. Louis, said Curran, Archbishop Glennon had named three clergymen of the diocese to be moderators of Social Justice clubs. Cleveland’s police, it became evident, were friendly to the movement. While peddling of anti-Semitic literature (as well as auto-license-plate attachments bearing a Coughlin slogan) was permitted, distributors of rival handbills and magazines were pushed around, and one was hustled away in a patrol wagon.

Unquestionably because of the public condemnation of Coughlin by the late Cardinal Mundelein, the movement has been slow to get a foothold in Chicago. A Front unit does exist there, however. Early in December a plane flew over Chicago’s North Side, letting loose a shower of anti-Semitic leaflets; similar leaflets, reading, “Christian Vigilantes Arise! Boycott the Movies!” appeared months ago on the west coast.

The St. Louis unit of the Front held at least six mass meetings in recent months, each attracting from 1,000 to 4,500 disciples. A Silver Shirt pamphlet titled “Dupes of Judah,” the “Protocols,” and a variety of other nonsense were prominently displayed at the rear of the meeting halls or sold outside. At the largest of the rallies, held in the St. Louis University gymnasium, hundreds of Fronters from Illinois descended in busloads. The preaching of race hatred, it should be pointed out, was denounced by the Dean of St. Louis University (a Jesuit college) and by Bishop Winkleman.

Techniques of slander have been notably unscrupulous in Minneapolis. Crudely forged handbills bearing the name of a local Jewish organization and addressed exclusively to Jews, recently inundated the city. They appeared to summon Jews to seize all industry and business in the United States, to ply gentiles with liquor in order “to further demoralize the Christian youth of America,” and to “make ourselves the masters and rulers of the world.” It was no accident that placed the handbills chiefly in the hands of non-
Jews.

At a Minnesota Christian Front rally in St. Paul, on October 21, over eight thousand people came to hear an hour of Coughlin. Master of ceremonies was Sheriff Thomas J. Gibbon. Policemen and deputy sheriffs outside kept twelve girls distributing an opposition paper away from the auditorium. From the platform it was announced that, if handed a copy of this paper, a loyal disciple should knock down the distributor.

In other sections of the country, the Christian Front or one or more of its affiliates has taken root. Throughout the Southwest, the current of anti-Semitism is flowing freely among the two million people of Mexican origin who read Franco-inspired Spanish-language newspapers. In Denver, while the turnout at Christian Front meetings is as yet small, the Fronters make themselves felt by upsetting displays in Jewish stores, promoting boycotts, and badgering Jewish employees in non-Jewish shops. Atlantic City and Miami have strong Coughlinite chapters. From a dozen cities come reports, such as one from Terre Haute, Indiana, that windows of Jewish shops have been smeared with defamatory slogans. In the farm belt and on the Pacific Coast, the Front is still to get into serious action. But California, fertile field for scores of racketeering “patriots,” seems to be ready for it. During the hearing in the Harry Bridges case, Dean Landis and attorneys on both sides received a flock of letters denouncing Jews—though the Jewish question was nowhere involved. Los Angeles followers of Coughlin banded together under the “Actioneers,” but publicity rendered the organization ineffectual.

IV

Laboratory of the Christian Front has been New York, where the racial melting pot, the Bund headquarters, and other factors combine to make an ideal hotbed of anti-Semitism. A glance at its origin, development, and the current manifestations there hint at what other cities may expect if the movement is not aborted.

Creation of a more or less militant organization was urged by Coughlin in the midst of his campaign opposing the lifting of the arms embargo against republican Spain in the spring of 1938. Calling on his clan to get together in “platoons,” he wrote in Social Justice:

Let your organization be composed of no more than 25 members. After a few contacts with these 25 persons you will observe that two of them may be capable of organizing 25 more. Invite these capable people to do that very thing.

Three months later, the first secret meetings of the Front were held in the rectory of a Catholic church in mid-Manhattan. Its mentor was a priest who controlled the local distribution of Social Justice. The signal for the mass attack, however, did not come until December, 1938, when Station WMCA dared refuse to put
a Coughlin speech on the air unless the station was accorded the customary privilege of seeing the script in advance. Five thousand shouting, pushing, frenzied men, women, and children were then mustered into a picket line outside the WMCA building, and the rumpus was staged Sunday after Sunday for thirty-six successive weeks. It took the outbreak of war in Europe to curb it.

Out of the picketing arose an epidemic of street meetings, the screaming of anti-Semitic slogans to accompany the hawking of Social Justice, and other offensives. By the end of July, Social Justice was proclaiming that "UNITS OF MILITANT CHRISTIAN FRONT ARE BEING FORMED IN THE MIDDLE WEST."

Coughlin has now modified his first disavowal of connection with the organization (made shortly after the January raid on the alleged plotters) to the extent of calling himself a "friend of the accused." The self-styled "troublesome priest," in Social Justice and in his broadcasts, has called for the formation of "platoons" and for "the Franco way." An editorial asked: "What are we waiting for — the revolution? Let's go!" In a Philadelphia speech, Coughlin declared that "The Christian Front is not a debating society; it is an action society. . . . God bless Mr. Cassidy and the Christian Front!" As late as January, 1940, an appeal for broadcast funds in Social Justice stated that "Father Coughlin is only the spokesman for a rapidly forming and tremendously powerful element of our country — the Christian Front."

Hitler drew to his movement people from the lower middle class and the unorganized ragtag and bobtail — the frustrated, the fanatic, the gullible, the opportunists. The Fronters are basically the same in composition, down to the neighborhood hooligans, the unemployed longshoremen, the politically disgruntled. Dominant are the young toughs and the elderly bigots, Irish Catholics and Nazi sympathizers.

Dress up some of the more ebullient units in brown uniforms, and they would be barely distinguishable from the SS corps. Apostles have enlisted recruits over eighteen "to go out into the streets and fight for their Christian ideals." Joseph Ellesbury McWilliams, leader of a Front offshoot, "revealed" that the Constitution permits citizens to bear firearms and invited his listeners to join "a fighting organization whose members would defend themselves with fists — and, if that's not enough, with other weapons." At one meeting, it was announced that "out in Queens we are organizing an army of ten thousand men." Christian Front membership blanks ask for the applicant's military record. Young proselytes were urged to join the Sports Club, to be trained in the use of leaded walking sticks. It
was members of this Sports Club whom the F.B.I. arrested for seditious conspiracy.

The little Führers of the cause, each of whom commands his own peanut brigade, hardly represent the respectable citizenry. It may be recalled that certain of the Nazi headmen once "did stretches" in prison or insane asylums.

In New York's Christian Front, the record of Edwin Westphal reveals that he was found guilty of burglary and has spent eight months in a reformatory and five months in a hospital for the mentally insane. A Christian Mobilizer leader, Edmund Vincent Burke, served eight months in jail for robbery. Allen Zoll, originator of the WMCA picketing idea, was recently indicted by a grand jury for extortion, charged with having demanded $7,500 from WMCA's president in return for arranging to disperse the picket line! The new Captain of the Christian Mobilizers Guard, John J. Olivo, served a penitentiary term for rape. A subway-circuit speaker known as Panama Bill is a former strikebreaker. Joseph Hartery, another Mobilizer fugleman, did thirty days in the workhouse for procuring. In the background of several Philadelphia Fronters, larceny figures prominently. The criminal roster can be extended.

The slightly less disreputable figures in the movement, obviously in it for profit, are simply attempting to sell anti-Semitism instead of something like a corn cure. All have an eye out for an angel who might subsidize them. Some are as frank as McWilliams, the former truck-

man, hosiery salesman, and inventor, who testified in court that "my occupation is trying to save America."

Although each of the constituent organizations in New York endeavors to assert its individuality, it is the co-ordinating Christian Front which schedules the meetings, rounds up the crowds, prepares the literature. An interlocking group of spellbinders and the exchange of periodicals and pamphlets further tie the groups together. Veiling the true strength of the unholy alliance, the creation of a variety of organizations — most of them doomed to be short-lived — sets up diversified media for attracting customers.

Here is the lineup:


Professional patriots, including the Crusaders for Americanism, the Flying Squads for Americanism, the American Nationalists, the Protestant War Veterans, the Committee for Defense of Constitutional Rights, and similar aggregations are on the racket and lunatic fringe.

The Greater New York Committee for Christian Action was created a few months ago to promote the Christian Index boycott. Also pushing the boycott are the Christian American League, the Christian Merchants and Consumers League, the German-American Business League, and the Christian Phalanx.

The American Brotherhood of Christians Congress was formed to sell stock in a proposed radio-station in Jersey City to provide Coughlin with a broadcast outlet in the New York area.

The Christian Labor Front and the Christian Workers Alliance try to penetrate trade unions and
unemployed groups.

Miscellaneous groups such as the Christian Minutemen, Christian Vigilante Front (strong-arm men), Christian Pioneers, Christian Congress, Christian Defenders (street speakers), and Christian Defense League (lawyers), are tiny units.

The Christian Mobilizers, most militant and vicious of all, were organized early last July as a fund-collecting and boycott agency. After two months, they split off, though still using Front facilities. Commander in chief of the Mobilizers, dapper Joe McWilliams, attended the Klan convention in Atlanta in September, and was promptly elected to the National Supreme Council.

The German-American Bund, which wildly cheers Coughlin's name and sells Social Justice at its own meetings, supplies organizing talent, stumpers, audiences, and material for Christian Front literature.

Evidence of ties between the Bund and elements of the Christian Front is ample. In a letter to the Deutsche Weckruf, Zoll thanked Fritz Kuhn for his aid in arranging the WMCA picketing. At the largest mass meeting held by the Mobilizers, Kuhn shared the platform with McWilliams and George Deatherage, Southern rabble rouser. Bund troopers formed a "guard of honor," and many in the audience gave the Nazi salute as McWilliams mounted the platform. Posters advertised a Bund picnic the following Sunday. Kuhn declaimed:

I am proud to be here and show through my presence and through the presence of Bund members that the German-American Bund stands shoulder to shoulder with the Christian Mobilizers.

At his curbstone meetings, McWilliams bellows: "America can never be without a leader as long as there is a copy of Mein Kampf!" It soon became apparent, in fact, that — with the American Nazis falling more and more into disrepute since the war began and particularly in view of Kuhn's imprisonment and wholesale resignations of Bund members — the Mobilizers and the Front were taking over many of the functions and activities of the Bund. Many Bund members were absorbed by "American" and "Christian" groups in the Front.

Techniques of heating up the atmosphere have gone through a process of evolution. Until the mass picketing was banned, the Fronters marched along screaming, "This is a Christian country! All Jews are Communists!" When a whistle blew, they broke ranks to mill up and down the street or through subway trains. Squads of Social Justice salesmen — sometimes fifty on one street — meanwhile peddled the sheet, shouting inflammatory exhortations.

Until the F.B.I. raid, similar tactics were used at the soapbox convocations in neighborhoods where Jews and Christians lived peaceably side by side for generations. Attendance ranged from a few hundred to two or three thousand, always including a number of "floaters" to "preserve order."

Speakers at rallies have the skill and intensity of a Holy Roller with a shot in the arm. They begin by denouncing communism, then identify communists with Jews, who are also
maligned as "international bankers" and "war mongers." City, State and federal administrations, unfriendly members of the Dies Committee, the press, and the radio are all assailed as Jew-controlled. Borrowing many phrases from Goebbels, the soapboxers refer to the President as "Rosenfelt" or, more intimately, "Rosie." Often a meeting ends with a pledge of allegiance to the American flag—and the Nazi salute.

If you had made a tour of Christian Front assemblages in New York in recent months, you would have been subjected to exhortations such as these:

I am not content to walk in the footsteps of Christ. I want to walk ahead of him with a club.

If this country gets into this war, we'll start a revolution and put machine guns on every corner in the city.

Get rid of your timidity. If we can find no other way, we may have to do it as Father Coughlin suggested, under a Franco.

You must learn to hate war mongers like Roosevelt... I propose to buy a lot of telephone poles and hang the war makers to them.

We must hate! We must get the youth aroused!

Even the most polite heckling at a meeting or a mild protest at the language used by Social Justice vendors has led to brutal fist-fights. When one man tried to question a statement by a Front orator, police took him into "protective custody" after strong-arm men mobbed him. A girl who interrupted a speaker was thrown to the ground and trampled upon. Hundreds of such incidents have occurred. Youths selling opposition literature were slapped, and several were arrested merely for displaying placards quoting the late Cardinal Mundelein and the Pope in their disapproval of anti-Semitism.

Throughout this period, New York's police on the whole behaved with restraint—at first, with overzealous restraint. Although for a while there was evidence that many policemen were discriminating in favor of the Front, the mayor and police commissioner have now brought about some degree of impartiality. It must be remembered that, of the 19,000 members of the force, 12,000 are Irish Catholics. One cop boasted that there are six thousand policemen enrolled in the Front. Three hundred, including one lieutenant, would be nearer the truth, although early reports on the questionnaire distributed to members of the Department by Commissioner Valentine seemed to indicate that several thousand had been members at one time or another.

An important plank in the Front platform, the boycott of Jews, has taken on serious proportions. Crowds at meetings are urged to sign a pledge to "Buy Christian." Three editions of the Christian Index, cataloguing acceptable merchants, have been published; readers are solemnly assured that "Christ himself sponsored this little leaflet." The latest edition covers 125 pages. Boycott stickers are pasted on auto windshield, Jewish shop
such as these:

I am not content to walk in the footsteps of Christ. I want to walk ahead of him with a club.

We must hate! We must get the youth aroused!

While J. Edgar Hoover’s melodramatic arrest of the seventeen charged with conspiracy and the attendant condemnation of the movement in the nation’s press has undoubtedly dealt the Front a paralyzing body blow, it can hardly be considered a knockout. Coughlin’s frenzied Sunday broadcasts continued until the mysterious (at this writing) announcement of February 4. In New York, meetings are still held nightly — 1,500 were present at a Bronx meeting less than a week after the F.B.I. raid, and 3,000 attended a Brooklyn rally for the seventeen prisoners. With the winter lull over, the movement is already gaining momentum for a fresh spring drive. Like the recurring Ku Klux Klan, the Christian Front seems destined to stay for a while.

For it is clear that, despite its obstreperous tactics, its sly or open espousal of Naziism and Fascism, and the frightening off of many potential converts, the movement was making headway throughout the nation. In the first months of its activity, the timidity of city officials toward it — obviously in fear of alienating a great block of Catholic votes — undoubtedly encouraged the venom peddlers. Of greatest aid to the Front is the absence of a disapproving word from official, authoritative spokesmen of the Catholic Church.

Let the Catholic hierarchy in our cities speak out bluntly against the mongers of anti-Semitism, and it may strike the death blow to the Front. Decisive police enforcement of existing laws against incitement to riot and disturbing the peace would help speed its interment. To dig up the roots, there must be positive education in racial and religious problems, a relentless exposure of the Front’s kinship with Fascist-inclined forces, and, more basically, the reclamation of the social and economic bankrupts who flock to the movement for salvation. Without the execution of an adequate counteroffensive, what has thus far been little more than an outrageous public scandal may conceivably turn into an impressive threat to our democracy.

THE FORUM

MARCH, 1940
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