# America faced domestic fascists before and buried that history

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Fritz Kuhn, center, is congratulated by fellow officers of the German American Bund in New York on Sept. 3, 1938.

*AP Photo*

Masked officers conduct immigration raids. National Guard troops patrol American cities, and protesters decry their presence as a "fascist takeover." White supremacists openly proclaim racist and antisemitic views.

Is the United States sliding into fascism? It's a question that divides a good portion of the country today.

Embracing a belief in American exceptionalism – the idea that America is a unique and morally superior country – some historians suggest that "it can't happen here," echoing the satirical title of Sinclair Lewis' 1935 book about creeping fascism in America. The social conditions required for fascism to take root do not exist in the U.S., these historians say.

Still, while fascist ideas never found a foothold among the majority of Americans, they exerted considerable influence during the period between the first and second world wars. Extremist groups like the Silver Shirts, the Christian Front, the Black Legion and the Ku Klux Klan claimed hundreds of thousands of members. Together they glorified a white Christian nation purified of Jews, Black Americans, immigrants and communists.

During the 1930s and early ’40s, fascist ideas were promoted and cheered on American soil by groups such as the pro-Nazi German American Bund, which staged a mass rally at New York’s Madison Square Garden in February 1939, displaying George Washington’s portrait alongside swastikas.

The Bund also operated lodges, storefronts, summer camps, beer halls and newspapers across the country and denounced the “melting pot.” It encouraged boycotts and street brawls against Jews and leftists and forged links to Germany’s Nazi party.

Yet the Bund and other far-right groups have largely vanished from public memory, even in communities where they once enjoyed popularity. As a sociologist of collective memory and identity, I wanted to know why that is the case.

## The Bund in New Jersey

My analysis of hundreds of oral histories of people who grew up in New Jersey in the 1930s and ’40s, where the German American Bund enjoyed a particularly strong presence, suggests that witnesses saw them as insignificant, “un-American” and unworthy of remembrance.

But the people who rallied with the Bund for a white, Christian nation were ordinary citizens. They were mechanics and shopkeepers, churchgoers and small businessmen, and sometimes elected officials. They frequented diners, led PTA meetings and went to church. They were American.

Nearly 1,000 uniformed men wearing swastika armbands and carrying Nazi banners parade past a reviewing stand in New Jersey on July 18, 1937.

*AP Photo*

When they were interviewed decades later, many of those who had seen Bundists up close in their communities remembered the uniforms, the swastika armbands, the marching columns. They recalled the local butcher who quietly displayed sympathy for Nazism, the Bund's boycotts of Jewish businesses, and the street brawls at Bund rallies.

German American interviewees, who remember firsthand the support the Bund enjoyed before the U.S. entered World War II, 50 years later laughed at family members and neighbors who once supported the organization. Even Jewish interviewees who recalled fearful encounters with Bundists during that period tended to minimize the threat in retrospect. Like their German American counterparts, they framed the Bund as deviant and ephemeral. Few believed the group, and the ideas for which it stood, were significant.

I believe the German Americans' laughter decades after the war was over, and after the revelations of the mass murder of European Jews, may have been a way for them to distance themselves from feelings of shame or discomfort. As cognitive psychologists show, people tend to erase or minimize inconvenient or painful facts that may threaten their sense of self.

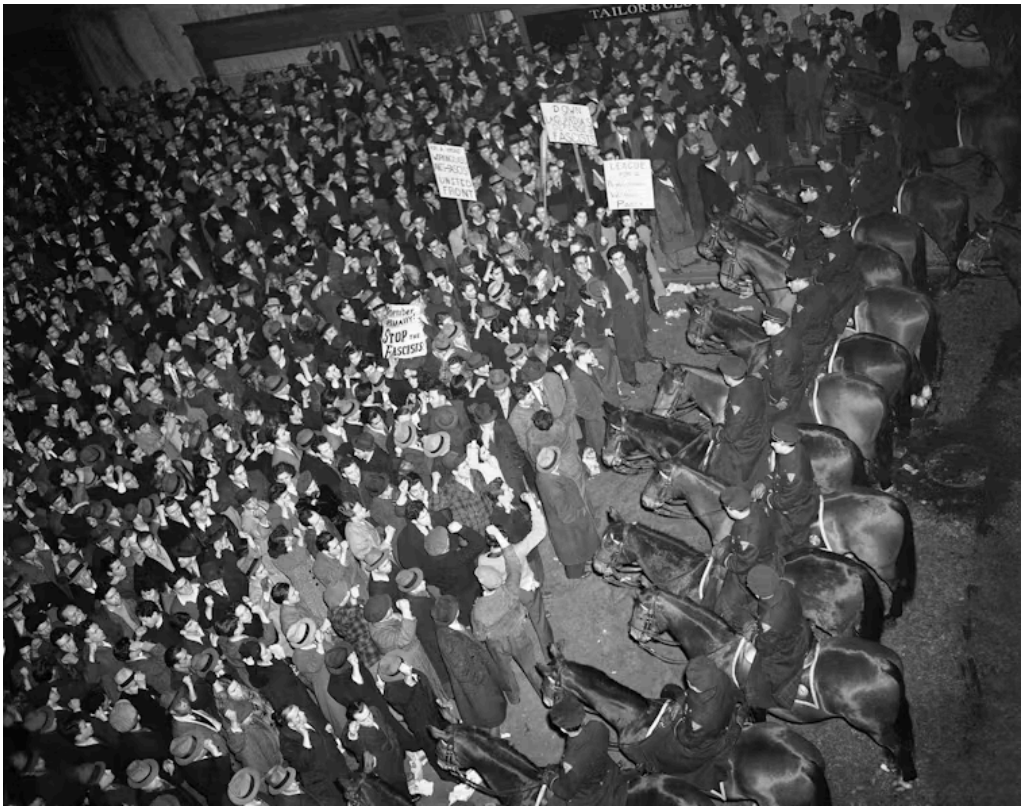
Collective memories are also highly selective. They are influenced by the groups – nation, community, family – in which they are members. In other words, the past is always shaped by the needs of the present.

After World War II, for example, some Americans reframed the major threat facing the U.S. as communism. They cast fascism as a defeated foreign evil, while elevating "reds" as the existential threat. Collectively, Americans preferred a simpler national tale: Fascism was "over there." America was the bulwark of democracy "over here." This is one way forgetting works.

Communities will remember what they have forgotten or minimized when history is taught, markers are erected, archives are preserved and commemorations are staged. The U.S. has done that for the Holocaust and for the Civil Rights Movement. But when it comes to the history of homegrown fascism, and local resistance to it, few communities have made efforts to preserve this history.

## Remembering difficult pasts

At least one community has tried. In Southbury, Connecticut, community members erected a small plaque in 2022 to honor townspeople who in 1937 organized to keep the Bund from building a training camp there. The inscription is simple: "Southbury Stops Nazi Training Camp."




New York City mounted police form a line outside Madison Square Garden, where the German American Bund was holding a rally on Feb. 20, 1939.

*AP Photo/Murray Becker*

The story it tells provides more than an example of local pride – it's a template for how communities can commemorate the moments when ordinary citizens said "no."

When Americans insist that “it can’t happen here,” they exempt themselves from vigilance. When they ignore or discount extremism, seeing it as “weird” or “foreign,” they miss how effectively such movements borrowed American idioms, such as patriotism, Christianity and law and order, to further hatred, violence and exclusion.

Research shows that some Americans have been drawn to movements that promise purity, unity and order at the expense of their neighbors’ rights. The point of remembering such histories is not to wallow in shame, nor to collapse every political dispute into “fascism.” It is to offer an accurate account of America’s democratic vulnerabilities.

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