

CHAPTER 1

The Idea of a Christian Front

THE GUESTS HAD JUST BEEN SEATED FOR DINNER WHEN THE TELEPHONE rang in the hall of Major General Smedley Butler's suburban Philadelphia mansion. The general excused himself; he planned to be brief. But when he picked up the phone, he was instantly suspicious. Recognizing the voice on the other end, Butler signaled to one of his guests, a newspaper editor, to scurry upstairs to another phone and secretly listen in on the call. "Smedley," the voice crackled, "would you be willing to head an armed force of men . . . to proceed to Mexico and overthrow the Mexican government?"¹

It was Father Coughlin on the line, the Radio Priest with tens of millions of listeners. The Mexican government was "picking on the Catholic Church," Coughlin explained, and President Lázaro Cárdenas "had kidnapped the Archbishop" of Mexico City. Coughlin indicated that he had financial backing, men, and arms. All he needed was someone to lead the troops. Butler had fought in World War I and the Mexican Revolution, but by August 1935, when Coughlin called, the general had hung up his spurs. He also knew that to join an unofficial expedition to overthrow the Mexican government "amounted to treason." Butler later explained that he instructed Coughlin to back off: if Coughlin "started such a movement, the President of the United States would assemble a militia" and put a stop to it. The priest reportedly then told the general not to worry about President Roosevelt, because the fighters "would take care of him on the way down." Butler, one of the most

decorated Marines in history, was thunderstruck. “It seemed to be Coughlin’s intention to start an armed revolution in the United States,” Butler worried.²

A few weeks later Coughlin had another exchange with a general, but this conversation was conspicuously public. The matter at hand was the Nye-Sweeney bill, then under debate in Congress. If passed into law, the legislation would give Congress sole authority to issue currency and would create “peoples’ banks” in each state, replacing the Federal Reserve. Coughlin believed the state-controlled peoples’ banks would alleviate the problem of “Jewish gold” hoarded by “Shylocks” and instead emphasize what he called “Gentile silver.” General Hugh S. Johnson, head of the New Deal’s National Recovery Administration, was having none of it. He pushed back at Coughlin, arguing that the priest’s support for the Nye-Sweeney bill was a function of religious intolerance and racism, not banking sense. Addressing Coughlin directly on the radio, Johnson argued that “both you and Adolf” had proposed policies “as alike as peas in a pod” and warned that Coughlin “could become a *Reichsfuehrer*.” Coughlin responded that Johnson had “out-Stalined Stalin” by presiding over an increasingly “Communitic” National Recovery Administration.³

In 1935 no Roman Catholic priest in America had ever been publicly compared to Hitler, and no American public servant had ever been publicly compared to Stalin. The idea of a Roman Catholic priest urging the overthrow of a foreign government was as fantastic as it was incomprehensible. In these two episodes, Coughlin announced, in rough form, the central commitments of what would become the Christian Front in the United States: anti-Communism and anti-Semitism. Coughlin had been preaching these values in sermons, on the radio, and in writing for some time, but the mid-1930s was an inflection point—the period when sometimes-inchoate and contradictory commitments began to coalesce into an ideology that could drive an armed revolutionary movement in the United States.

That is what the Christian Front became in 1939, but it did not start out that way. Indeed, it did not start in the United States at all but rather in Spain. In 1936 brewing tensions exploded into civil war between the left-wing government and Fascists under the command of General Francisco Franco. The suffering of some Catholics at the hands of the government inspired outrage from the likes of Coughlin, but also from a man whom history has largely ignored: Arnold Lunn, a British Catholic convert who covered the war as a reporter and went on to develop the idea of the Christian Front.

To Lunn, the Christian Front was a necessary reaction to the depredations of the civil war. Lunn's key ideas included Christian militancy and what later became known as ecumenical anti-Communism, whereby Christians of all denominations would join together in defending each other from the onslaught of godless leftists under Moscow's command. In just two years or so, Lunn's ideas would cross seas and oceans, penetrating the Vatican and the United States. Adherents such as Coughlin refit the Christian Front concept to suit their purposes, a subject I discuss in detail in the next chapter. Nonetheless, Lunn would leave an enduring mark. His focus on the persecution of Catholics in Spain galvanized activists for years to come, as did his certainty that Christians were under violent attack from the mortal adversary of Communism. Lunn and key supporters argued that Christians had to defend themselves, if necessary using force, lest the "reds" wipe them off the map.

Coughlin was already a militant when he heard the call of the Christian Front, but the clarity of Lunn's thesis, and the sanction it won from the Vatican, changed the game. In 1935 Coughlin dreamed of a Catholic army to unseat a Mexican government perceived as an enemy of the cloth, but he was still far more a provocateur than an organizer. That much seems clear in his absurd, doomed outreach to General Butler. By 1939, having embraced the idea of a Christian Front, Coughlin was armed with new ideas and rallying cries—ideas and cries around which he could muster men eager for battle.

Ecumenism and Anti-Communism: The Birth of a Global Movement

Father Coughlin was an agile political barnstormer. Over the course of the 1930s, he reached out to the working class and campaigned for the relatively novel ideal of human rights even as his anti-Semitism deepened. He also vacillated between Catholic militancy and engagement through normal political channels. Thus in 1934, a year before his failed effort to recruit General Butler to lead a paramilitary expedition, Coughlin announced the creation of his National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ), which was running populist, anti-Roosevelt candidates for office two years later.

If the NUSJ was neither militant nor overly activist, some critics were nonetheless skeptical, fearing that Coughlin's politics pointed inevitably toward violent, authoritarian ends. For instance, William E. Dodd, the US ambassador to Germany from 1933 to 1937, was convinced that the NUSJ was nefarious, seeing in it "the germs of Fascism." The NUSJ's advocacy of consolidating

all American union activity under the Department of Labor smacked Dodd as nothing more than the establishment of a “Nazi-like labor front in America.” “The program of Hitler,” Dodd warned, “resembles in many respects the program inaugurated by Father Coughlin’s Union for Social Justice.”⁴ But what was clear to Dodd was muddled in the minds of others. Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders in the United States struggled to figure out Coughlin’s relationship to Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and American political life. This was new territory: an immigrant church had its first celebrity priest, and he blurred the lines between sacred theology and profane politics. Coughlin’s political ideas were quasireligious, sometimes comical, and sometimes penetrating.

Coughlin’s efforts were indeed hard to add up, given his vacillation between militancy and political activism, a ministry of the soul and absorption in worldly matters. But there was a thread connecting it all. Between 1935 and 1938, Coughlin sought in secret to foster a Christian arm for the sword of the spirit—a sword that could be brought to bear against the incursions of global Communism. Communism, Coughlin believed, was an evil nurtured and foisted upon the world by Jews. Communism in his time was becoming more and more the enemy of Christians, its allegedly exterminationist tendency having infected not just revolutionary Russia but also overwhelmingly Catholic countries such as Mexico and Spain.

Coughlin was hardly alone in his concern for global Christianity in the face of “godless” Communism. A major influence on Coughlin proved to be the British Catholic Arnold Lunn. The two sympathized with each other’s writings on the Spanish Civil War and would meet secretly in 1940. Like Coughlin, Lunn became incensed by atrocities committed against Catholics by Spain’s left-wing government, known as the Popular Front. During the height of the civil war, Lunn reported to Coughlin that hundreds of Spanish churches “had been totally destroyed” by the “Red bombers” of the Popular Front government. “A victorious Red Loyalist government,” Lunn warned, “means to destroy religion once and for all on the Spanish peninsula.” Lunn also expressed to Coughlin his displeasure with left-leaning American Catholics, who showed a “pious refusal to grow indignant over the butcherings by the Reds and their destruction of religion.”⁵

Unlike Coughlin, Lunn went beyond the American Catholic scene and called out Protestants as well. From his perch as a visiting professor of apologetics at Notre Dame in Indiana, Lunn excoriated Protestants who seemingly

did not care about the considerable suffering of Spanish Catholics—more than 6,000 priests, nuns, and others in the employ of the Church were executed by the government's firing squads. "When we find Protestants traveling around our country as the guests of militant atheists who have murdered thousands of priests and nuns," Lunn wrote in early 1938, "we begin to wonder whether these Protestants think of Catholics as fellow Christians."⁶ Statements like these caught Coughlin's attention, helping him envision the conceptual framework for an anti-Communist Christian militancy responsive especially to the persecution of Catholics.

Lunn's own views were the product of an exciting and multifaceted life of overlapping commitments to flesh and spirit. Born in Madras in 1888 to the medical doctor and English Methodist missionary Henry Lunn, Arnold Lunn spent his youth at the Harrow school and Oxford, with stints in the Swiss Alps. He established the Alpine Ski Club, was the founding editor of a publication aimed at skiers, and in 1922 introduced the modern slalom course into the world of downhill skiing. A cultural elite and a Methodist who seemed most enthusiastic about playing outdoors, Lunn was, as one observer noted, "peculiarly outfitted to rank in the [Catholic] Church Militant."⁷

There are, however, signs in Lunn's background that point to his later militant awakening. Although Lunn's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1933 put him doctrinally at odds with his father Henry, the younger Lunn shared his father's missionary spirit and capacious sense that Christians should cooperate across lines of sect. While working in India from 1886 to 1888, Henry rankled the sensibilities of the Methodist leadership, arguing that "missionaries should spend more time helping the lower castes and Untouchables" in order to "lift degraded man nearer God and nearer Heaven."⁸ Likewise Arnold's militancy reflected his sense of responsibility for the world as it is—for humanity, in addition to the divine. When Henry's missionary service in India ended, he began a tourism business, which he connected to Christian ecumenism by promoting travel to the growing circuit of ecumenical conferences being held at fashionable European resorts. Later Arnold would take advantage of his father's company to bring together Christian leaders to discuss the situation in Spain and the need for cross-denominational opposition to Communism.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, Arnold Lunn sped to the scene to report on the conflict. Spain would become the proving ground for Lunn's Catholicism. Like many British Catholics who were paying attention to

Spain, Lunn viewed the war as a contest between the Church, championed by General Franco and his Nationalists, and what Lunn called the “militant, anticlerical Communism” of the Popular Front, also known as the Republicans or Loyalists. Some American Catholics felt similarly. Lunn became a sort of spokesperson for English-speaking Catholics sympathetic with Franco. Lunn was under no illusions about Franco’s authoritarian intentions, but, as far as Lunn was concerned, the Republicans had come to power illegitimately and were no more enamored of democracy. The war was nothing but a stark choice between “an authoritarian government which would [either] protect [or] persecute Christianity.”⁹

With the zeal of a recent convert, Lunn cast the Spanish conflict as a holy war. “On Palm Sunday, 1937,” he wrote, “I stood on a tower near Madrid and saw the churches in which the Red Lamp had been extinguished by the Red Fury.” (The red lamp refers to the vigil light placed in church sanctuaries, indicating the presence of the divine.) Lamenting Christian suffering in Spain, Lunn was convinced that the streets of Madrid would each become a latter-day Via Dolorosa, the path Jesus walked through Jerusalem en route to the crucifixion. But Lunn also “thanked God for the fact that the Catholic pulse still beat in the arteries of Madrid,” and the Nationalists, whatever their flaws, were on the right side spiritually, “fighting the battle of Christian civilization.”

The profound sense of duty Lunn felt for his Spanish coreligionists inspired the writings—largely ignored by scholars—that introduced the concept of a Christian Front. It was Lunn’s small 1937 book *Spain and the Christian Front* that put forward the Christian Front as the Popular Front’s politico-theological opposite. The stakes could not be higher, Lunn argued: the Popular Front, directed from Moscow, was trying to exterminate Catholics. “By means of Red terror,” the Popular Front “murders and terrorizes any moderates into submission,” he wrote. Church burnings and executions of priests and nuns, atrocities that were especially pronounced in Madrid and the Basque country, proved the point. Yet, wary of the Nationalists’ own extreme violence, the Holy See refused to endorse either side politically. “Priests have an odd reactionary bias against people who want to kill them,” Lunn wrote in a wry moment.¹⁰

Critically, it was not only the Vatican Lunn hoped to convince, because the Christian Front was to be more than a geopolitical counterpoise to Spain’s Popular Front. Lunn pitched his work primarily to lay Americans and British who could build a popular, unifying, and durable movement—not a one-off political statement or alliance against a particular political rival. The Chris-

tian Front would respond to the Popular Front, but it would also, and more grandly, catalyze ecumenism, bringing together Christians across denominations and across the world in a cohesive spiritual and political project. Once reunited socially and theologically under the aegis of the Christian Front, Protestants and Catholics would battle against their shared enemy: global Communism.

The common ground on which Lunn would unite Christians was a theological one, marked above all by persecution. The persecution of Catholics by Communists was of a piece with the persecution Saints Augustine and John Chrysostom had discussed in writings that resonated across denominational boundaries. Lunn also tied Catholic persecution to the crucifixion, a site of solidarity for all Christians. Through Christo-centrism—attention to the figure of Christ and his suffering—the Christian Front would bring diverse Christians back to the basics on which they all agreed.¹¹

Lunn's embryonic Christian Front was perhaps the first instance of ecumenical anti-Communism, a term Richard Hofstadter used in 1965 to describe the postwar affiliation between Catholic McCarthyites and American Evangelical anti-Communists, who were mainly Baptists. These groups joined hands on the basis of a number of interests, but a shared sense of persecution was key among them, as McCarthy's backers crossed denominational lines in their perception that Communism threatened Christians of every stripe. Ecumenical anti-Communism as practiced by Lunn was not only new, it was also novel in that it broke with expectations: usually religious persecution turns the members of a group inward, creating a siege mentality within the religion itself. But Lunn argued that Communist persecutions of Spanish Catholics should have turned Catholics outward and brought other Christians to their aid. As Lunn put it, "When they are attacked or persecuted by atheists," authentic Christians "instinctively align themselves with Christians of other communions." He urged Protestants not to "pass by on the other side like the Levite in the parable" but rather to heighten "the bond which unites them with Catholics."¹²

In December 1937, a month after publishing *Spain and the Christian Front*, Lunn had his first opportunity to test the appeal of his message, during a lecture at Boston College on the topic of "a united Spanish front." The environment at Boston College was a friendly one, as the Jesuits who ran the school were predisposed against Communism. But what Lunn said in Boston had little to do with ecumenism, in spite of its centrality to his vision. Instead he

marked out the battlefield by encouraging antipathy toward the Spanish Republicans and sympathy for the Catholics they persecuted. “Whenever Communists gained control in Spain,” Lunn argued, “terrorism followed.” He assailed the Popular Front for “destruction of church property and the burning of priests and nuns and the mass murder of the faithful.” “The Loyalists aren’t loyal at all,” Lunn said, “unless it’s to Russia and Communism.” He also scored “pinkish professors and newspapers” for supposedly justifying the ruin of church property.¹³ The introduction of the Christian Front in Boston, a city that would later be the movement’s epicenter, might have attended to the possibilities of Christian ecumenism. Instead that introduction was freighted with fear and intolerance.

If Boston College welcomed Lunn, England seemed determined to push him away. Lunn was baffled by English Protestant leaders, who remained unwilling to make statements in support of Spanish Catholics. Indeed, many English Protestant leaders were backing the Loyalists. “I have cudged my brains in vain to find the explanation of their support of the so-called Government of Spain,” Lunn wrote. Could it be that the church of Lunn’s father did “not regard the Catholic Church as a branch of Christianity”—that the English clergy did not accept “professing Roman Catholics as entitled to the rights enjoyed by the rest of mankind”?¹⁴ Perhaps fear and anger worked at Boston College, but if Lunn was to attract support closer to home, he would have to redouble his ecumenical outreach. Arnold and his father Henry would work together on that project, taking advantage of Henry’s travel business.

At about the time of Arnold’s conversion in 1933, Henry devised a new offering, an upscale and exclusive package tour. He called it the Hellenic Travelers Club. The club consisted of two- or three-week summer cruises to Greece and the Aegean Islands, aboard a yacht hosting eminent scholars and writers. These intellectuals, who traveled for free, were expected to mingle and converse with the well-heeled paying customers. One sailing included the novelist Hugh Walpole, the journalist and poet Vita Sackville-West, and her husband the historian and politician Harold Nicolson. William Butler Yeats joined another cruise, along with fellow poet Lennox Robinson. These luminaries might also present short lectures, and, as Walpole recalled, “in the evening Sir Henry Lunn delivered an appropriate sermon.”¹⁵ (Henry was named a knight bachelor in 1910.)

In February and March 1938, rather than sermonizing, Henry used his Hellenic Travelers Club to bring Catholics and Protestants together on the issue

of Communism. With Arnold's prompting, Henry invited Catholic and Protestant dignitaries to his yacht to discuss mutual "efforts which are called for by the campaign against religion and the propagation of Godlessness by Russian Soviet Communism." Putting out to sea, the horizon sinking in the background, Henry believed that his gathering was the first since the Reformation at which Catholics and Protestants joined in confronting a theological issue.¹⁶

The guests included four Anglican bishops, one Methodist bishop, one Catholic bishop, two lords, an earl, a viscount, two laywomen, and one Jesuit priest. The Protestant cleric most in agreement with the Lunn's proposal for a Christian Front was W. R. Inge, the dean of London's famed St. Paul's Cathedral. Fuming about the "massacres and outrages" in Spain, Inge compared Communism to a "disease." He claimed that in areas of Spain controlled by Loyalists, "no religious services have been possible" for over a year. "The issue is perfectly clear," Inge impressed upon the assembled, "the enemy . . . is [the] anti-Christ in person." Inge asked his fellow Protestants to "close ranks as far as we can" with Catholics. He was not ready to achieve total theological harmony, noting that "reunion is far away." But exigency called at least for an alliance. "In this battle we may surely all fight together," he concluded in militaristic terms that previewed the language Christian Fronters in the United States would soon adopt as they recruited men eager to do violence.¹⁷

Arthur Hinsley, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, joined Inge in supporting "a United Christian Front against the worldwide anti-Christian onslaught." Anti-Communism as a motivator for ecumenism made sense to Hinsley. "There have been in the past misunderstandings and faults of manner on both sides," he allowed, referring to Catholics and Protestants, "but the realization of a common peril is drawing Christians together in practical sympathy." To Arnold Lunn, comments like Hinsley's were a balm. Lunn's conversion to Roman Catholicism had erected a barrier between himself and his devout Methodist father, yet here was a cardinal endorsing reconciliation. The effort to ground ecumenism in anti-Communism was of great personal meaning to the Lunn's, becoming a shared passion of father and son. Arnold would go on to write glowingly about his father's efforts to create a Christian Front.¹⁸

Not everyone aboard ship was friendly to the proposition of a Christian Front. Lord Willoughby Hyett Dickinson, leader of the World Alliance for

International Friendship, was wary of the militarism built into the concept. “It was during the Great War that the term front” came into use, Dickinson noted. “Pictures still fill the minds of millions with ghastly memories and nightmares.” He insisted that any strain of militarism be expunged. “If we are to speak of a Christian Front we must be careful lest we associate it too directly with the process of fighting.” Dickinson approved of Lunn’s organizational idea and of ecumenism, but he made clear that “Christians need not use machine guns.”¹⁹

Another onboard critic was the Jesuit priest Martin D’Arcy. On paper, D’Arcy seemed a likely partner: the Master of Campion Hall, Oxford—the first Roman Catholic college established at Oxford since the Reformation—D’Arcy was strongly anti-Communist. In the late 1950s, he would publish *Communism and Christianity*, in which he made plain that the two systems were “as opposed as earth to heaven” because Communism “denied the grace and transcendence,” of God. D’Arcy was also Arnold Lunn’s close friend and had administered his first Holy Communion.²⁰

Yet D’Arcy objected to the very core of the Christian Front thesis. “A Catholic is not bound to take the side of Franco in the Spanish Civil War,” D’Arcy urged the Hellenic Travelers Club. This was so because the fight carried on by the Church Militant had nothing to do with politics. Rather, “the fight is principally an interior one fought by each individual against himself,” D’Arcy held. He also rejected the notion that a Christian Front movement was necessary from an ecumenical standpoint: “Already, I believe the threat of the barbarians has served to unite Christians,” he said. Finally, in an ominous foreshadowing, D’Arcy cut to a more basic concern. “A single idea can create fanaticism,” he warned.²¹

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The cruises had mixed results, winning the Lunn’s support among some influential thinkers and churchmen while alienating others. Exactly what sentiments emerged among the paying guests is impossible to say. We can, however, be confident in the success of the Lunn’s other key project of persuasion, this one decidedly more important than intellectual courtship on the high seas.

Rather than poets and priests, the second project was directed at the top of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Outreach to the Vatican began in late

summer 1937, when Henry Lunn commissioned Captain Archibald Henry Maule Ramsay, a Conservative member of Parliament, to approach the Holy See in an effort to get the pope's blessing for a "united Christian Front against the Communists in Spain." Ramsay was a fierce ally, appalled by the Loyalist attacks on Roman Catholics in Spain and a strong supporter of Franco. Indeed, Ramsay may have been a more apt forerunner of the Christian Front in practice than the Lunnns were, as he not only supported ecumenical anti-Communism, *avant la lettre*, but also proved to be a strident anti-Semite. In the years after his initial involvement with the Lunnns, Ramsay gave speeches to Britain's Nazi-aligned Nordic League and earned the praise of Fascist journals. Later he founded the Right Club, a group of high-powered British politicians and business magnates who spurned Jews. Ramsay also was a confidant of Tyler Kent, a twenty-nine-year-old cipher clerk at the US Embassy in London and fellow anti-Semite, who became a cause célèbre on the American and British far right after he was arrested for espionage in 1940, stripped of diplomatic immunity, secretly tried and convicted, and sentenced to a seven-year prison term in the United Kingdom. Kent's supporters on both sides of the Atlantic argued that he was framed by the Roosevelt administration, which they alleged was controlled by Jews.²²

But before Ramsay dove headfirst into anti-Semitism, he was an anti-Communist attracted to the idea of a unified Christian bulwark against the Soviets and their perceived agents—like the Spanish Loyalists. In his initial outreach to the Vatican—a letter to Monsignor Paschal Robinson, the Holy See's Apostolic Delegate to Ireland—Ramsay described "the British Churches cooperating with the Roman Catholic Church with a view to presenting a United Christian Front against the Red Menace to Christianity." Ramsay's letter noted that 6,000 clergy, nuns, and others working in the Church had "been murdered by the Reds," constituting a "Spanish tragedy" that was "threatened and inspired by Moscow."²³ The letter's appeal was limited to the situation in Spain, which perhaps was attractive to the Vatican, enabling it to consider an incremental step toward anti-Communist ecumenism—a less drastic position than later, overtly violent incarnations of the Christian Front would adopt. In any case, the Holy See was intrigued, and its Secretariat of State began preparing a reply.

A draft reply to Ramsay, completed in early October 1937, indicates the Holy See's high level of interest. The draft offered "commendation for such initiatives" as were carried out by the Lunnns' Committee for a United Christian

Front, which was said to be “on the same path” as the Holy See itself. The draft also announced support for the front’s “specific mission.”²⁴ Indeed, the Vatican had already begun sacralizing anti-Communism; the draft recommends that Ramsay examine the previous month’s encyclical *Ingravescentibus malis*, in which Pope Pius XI encouraged “evangelic wisdom” as a repellent to “the execrable theories of the Communists.”²⁵ Both the encyclical and the draft letter affirm that the Vatican saw anti-Communism as theologically justified.

There is no indication that the draft letter was ever sent to Ramsay. Giuseppe Cardinal Pizzardo, the secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, asked Paschal Robinson for guidance on the response, but Robinson demurred.²⁶ Robinson promised Pizzardo a report on Ramsay’s Christian Front committee, but the available evidence suggests that no such report ever arrived. We also do not know if Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, the Holy See’s secretary of state and future Pope Pius XII, saw Ramsay’s original plea.

Yet Pacelli soon adopted the Christian Front idea in no uncertain terms. “Cardinal Pacelli Urges United Christian Front to Fight Foes of Church,” one headline blared after the cardinal announced his position at the 34th International Eucharistic Congress, which gathered in Hungary in early June 1938. Pacelli’s speech was addressed to an audience of 150,000 at Budapest’s Heroes’ Square, and from there to the rest of the world. The pope had sent Pacelli to Budapest as papal legate *a latere*, a special designation signaling that Pacelli’s message was important for both believers and diplomats. The speech was controversial, with some interpreting it as an expression of Vatican support for the Nazis and for the Hungarian National Socialist Party, both of which premised their appeals on anti-Communism. Was Pacelli signaling support for Nazism’s anti-Communism, or was he unveiling a distinctive Catholic anti-Communism? Whatever the case, his ninety-minute address perfectly captured the Lunn thesis.

Pacelli proposed an ecumenical Christian Front as an effort to save not just Catholicism but indeed the “Christian creed” from a “godless Army.” Pacelli warned that “the Godless strive to proscribe Christ” and to “destroy churches in their efforts to substitute a travesty upon the gospel for true Christianity.” For many who heard the speech or read excerpts, the image of destroyed churches undoubtedly inspired thoughts of the conflict in Spain. “Threatened by atheistic Communism, all nations should unite,” Pacelli urged, without distinguishing Catholic and Protestant countries. “The mili-

tant Godless are face to face with us . . . shaking the clenched fist of [the] anti-Christ against everything we hold most sacred.”²⁷ It was as if Pacelli had lifted Ramsay’s letter and broadcast its contents in Budapest.

There is no evidence that Arnold Lunn was aware of Pacelli’s Budapest speech. Had he been, surely the convert Lunn would not have minded the Holy See’s appropriation of his ecumenical anti-Communist agenda. And, one way or the other, Pacelli’s endorsement of the Christian Front concept reached powerful figures who would carry the Christian Front idea forward. On that score, it is almost certain that Father Coughlin absorbed Pacelli’s words. In a strange and stunning development, earlier in the year Coughlin declined an invitation by the Vatican to speak alongside Pacelli at the Budapest Eucharistic Congress.²⁸ But on June 20, less than three weeks after Pacelli’s speech, Coughlin’s newspaper, *Social Justice*, featured a giant photograph of Pope Pius XI and, in large type underneath, “The Christian Front.” Father Coughlin added his own spin, though, attacking Communism as the work of Judeo-Bolsheviks. Coughlin’s Christian Front would align itself against “non-Christians,” a term understood by Catholics as anti-Semitic code.²⁹

In Coughlin’s hands, the Christian Front became something other than Arnold Lunn and probably Pacelli intended. Coughlin dropped the element of ecumenism, preferring his Christian Front to be exclusively Catholic. Coughlin did apparently share Lunn’s Christo-centrism, but the Detroit priest saw this theology as a way of appealing specifically to Catholics. And while Coughlin’s incorporation of anti-Semitism—veiled at first, later overt—was aligned with Ramsay, neither the Lunn nor the Catholic Church pressed the Judeo-Bolshevik myth.³⁰

That said, a key area of overlap between Coughlin’s and Lunn’s Christian Fronts was militancy. “It is gratifying to learn that so many are interested in making arrangements for the establishment of platoons,” Coughlin wrote in his June 20 reflection entitled “From the Tower.” Eerily prophetic, the Detroit priest signaled that his Christian Front “platoons” could be deployed on a “not far distant [day]—perhaps a matter of two years.” Coughlin did not, in June 1938, immediately set about recruiting an armed group under the name of the Christian Front, but he shared Lunn’s conviction that Catholics were engaged in a literal war with Communism, with their bodies on the line. As Lunn put it in a December 1938 diary entry, “Unless Catholics can be stirred up to militancy, then they are going to get it in the neck.” The solution was “a crusading and militant spirit,” although Lunn did not specify what exactly

this would look like.³¹ Coughlin thought in the same terms. He had been searching for a Catholic militant option against worldwide Communism since 1935, when he called up Smedley Butler and asked him to lead a strike force in Mexico. Cardinal Pacelli, apparently drawing on the ideas of Ramsay and the Lunn, crystallized the philosophy underlying that militant option, and Coughlin took Pacelli's sanction to heart. Hatched in Spain, explored in Boston, improved on the Aegean, refined in the Vatican, and announced from Budapest, Lunn's Christian Front matured rapidly. In 1939 it would flower under the care of Coughlin and fresh recruits in New York City.