

CHAPTER 9

Kissing Hitler

THE *PAULINE FRIEDERICH* HAD BEEN TIED UP SINCE SEPTEMBER 2, 1939. The tanker, carrying a million dollars of lubricating oil, was stranded in Boston Harbor just as the war in Europe commenced. Rather than expose his ship to the perils of a naval battle in the Atlantic, Captain Ernst Heitzman decided to stay put. But the crew was restive, wishing to return home, and a mutiny broke out while the vessel sat in maritime limbo. To keep his sailors in line, Heitzman held their wages hostage: anyone who disagreed with his decision would be refused their pay. In January 1940 the leader of the insubordinate wing, Second Officer Wilhelm Harren, filed a claim in US court for \$98.60 in unpaid wages. With federal action pending, US Marshals and Navy servicemen took possession of the ship. *Life* magazine called the impounding of the *Pauline Friederich* America's "first win" and a "bloodless victory in the Battle of the Atlantic."¹

Berlin was not celebrating that victory. Scholz was expected to save the *Pauline Friederich* and save face for Hitler. Scholz and Heitzman were also adamant that neither the United States nor the Allies be able to use the ship and were concerned about the possible forfeiture of its precious cargo. Scholz secretly boarded the tanker seven times while it was docked in Boston Harbor, and it was probably under his direction—and at the very least with his approval—that the loyal Nazis of the crew carried out their next steps.²

On March 29, 1941, members of the US Coast Guard boarded the ship for routine inspection. They found holes drilled into the cylinder walls of the

engine, pistons destroyed, the thrust bearing smashed, the auxiliary generator wrecked, and the bilge pump and steering engine demolished. These were serious crimes: tampering with the “motive power” of a commercial vessel “with the intent to injure or endanger the safety of the vessel,” within the jurisdiction of the United States, carried a potential sentence of twenty-five years in prison. US Marshals arrested Captain Heitzman and nine of his sailors. All pled not guilty; bail was set at the extraordinarily high number of \$450,000 (more than \$8 million in 2020 dollars). “Outside the courtroom,” one Massachusetts newspaper reported, “the crew members greeted Consul Herbert Scholz with hands upraised in the Nazi salute.” With Scholz and his compatriots in the midst of a serious legal, diplomatic, and public relations crisis, Moran tried to explain the “injustice” of the case to the people of Boston.³

His circular letter for the first week of April took aim at “the seizure of Axis ships by the United States, and the sabotage thereof.” There had been no other seizures, but pluralizing “ships” served Moran’s propaganda goals. Impoundment was said to exemplify “the corruption and the lack of neutrality in the New Deal administration.” Furthermore, the German saboteurs were guilty of nothing; their hands had been forced. “German sailors would never destroy their own ships without good reason,” Moran asserted, and the good reason was that the Americans and the British were trying to steal their vessel. The men had to scupper their ship lest it “be seized and sent to England as soon as Roosevelt could discover a legal or quasi-legal excuse.” These fine men of duty were victims of “nothing more than a persecution.” Moran also suggested that the sailors were being harassed or even tortured in custody, subjected to conditions that “have made it impossible for them to obtain decent sleep.” The ordeal of the *Pauline Friederich* threatened to drag America into the war, even though “Germany is more than willing to live at peace with us.” If only Americans would “finally wake up to the fact that this is a Jewish and international bankers war.”⁴

The *Pauline Friederich* incident was a missed opportunity for federal security agencies both to call out Scholz and to tie him to Moran and the Christian Front. The US Army’s Military Intelligence Division knew that Scholz was making routine visits to the ship and meeting with its captain, and MID passed that information to both the FBI and the Office of Naval Intelligence. None of these agencies endeavored to investigate whether Scholz directed the sabotage. In fact, MID made the considered choice to ignore what was going

on. Rather than categorize their information on the Scholz-Heitzman secret meetings as “Grade A - immediately dangerous,” MID characterized the situation as “Grade B - potentially dangerous,” a designation that ensured the case would not be taken seriously. They thereby allowed Scholz, and his relationships with Boston supporters like Moran, to escape scrutiny once again. It was only after the sabotage was discovered that US officials made law-enforcement efforts, and then there was no investigation of Scholz’s role. The Roosevelt administration responded to the sabotage by expelling the German naval attaché in Washington, Robert Witthoef-Emden, but Scholz was free to continue his espionage and propaganda work.⁵

This was in many ways the story of 1941, with respect to Scholz and Moran: they repeatedly slipped through the fingers of intelligence and law-enforcement agents. The men were under frequent suspicion, yet they managed again and again to escape sanction. To an extent, this was a result of their own cleverness—Moran had a talent for violating the spirit of the law while remaining just inside the boundaries of the letter, although eventually it became clear to some in the national security apparatus that he was an un-registered foreign agent. Even then, the attempt to investigate Moran was a lurching affair, mired in official ineptitude.

It is remarkable that Scholz managed to stay out of MID’s clutches despite all that the agency knew about him. After MID learned of Scholz’s visits to the *Pauline Friederich*, the agency developed a lead from a “reliable informant with a rating of A,” who interacted personally with Scholz and informed MID that the consul was up to no good. During a face-to-face conversation, Scholz reportedly told the informant that “information had been received from Germany that the consul who did the most to hinder the national defense of the United States . . . would be awarded a medal” by Hitler. The informant and MID both concluded that this was a ruse—that Scholz made the statement in hopes that it would reach American intelligence agencies “and thereby cause additional effort to be expended by US government agencies [by] keeping the Consuls under surveillance, thus diverting attention from . . . sabotage activities.”⁶ Thus Scholz either was under orders to undermine US national security directly, or he was playing games with the security bureaucracy in order to achieve that end indirectly. But MID did nothing. Between the informant and the *Pauline Friederich* visits, the agency had intelligence upon intelligence when it came to Scholz, yet still left him room to maneuver and make good use of Moran, his principal asset in Boston.

Camp Crazy

“Two riot squads were called out to maintain a semblance of order,” the *Boston Herald* reported of Moran’s first initiative of 1941. In the middle of January, Christian Front members showed up in numbers at Boston’s Faneuil Hall to support Verne Marshall, an Iowa newspaper editor and founder of the No Foreign Wars Committee. Marshall was set to debate Mayo Shattuck, vice chair of the New England branch of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, on a program broadcast from Boston to Philadelphia over the Colonial Network. “Police identified the hecklers of Mayo Shattuck as members of the Christian Front,” the American Jewish Committee’s Henry Levy noted, with “the heckling growing so loud that Verne Marshall made two or three attempts to stop it on the basis of sportsmanship.” But Moran and his crew refused to pipe down. “The heckling grew so loud that the moderator . . . threatened to cut the program off from the air.” The riot squads were unable to “restrain hundreds in the audience from booing and shouting at Shattuck, who . . . was still advocating aid to Britain when the nightmare ended.”⁷

Moments like these were aberrations for Moran, who was not typically one for public agitation. Only one prior incident, the fall 1939 heckling of Alfred Duff Cooper, resembled the Faneuil Hall episode, and on that earlier occasion there were no riot squads called in. By 1941, however, the tension had grown thicker in Boston and across the United States. A war that once felt far away was now an everyday concern, increasing the sense of urgency among interventionists and isolationists alike. It would be another year before US troops were involved, but the country was very much embroiled in the war economically and diplomatically, and military preparations were intensifying.

These preparations became Moran’s major concern. Whether or not he had received specific orders, it was in fact Scholz’s job to “hinder the national defense of the United States,” and in this effort Moran was an eager collaborator. Their target was the largest military cantonment in the First Corps Area: Camp Edwards on Cape Cod, a 22,000-acre base that would house nearly 40,000 soldiers during World War II. During the first week of March 1941, Moran went to Camp Edwards to address Catholic troops on the subject of Lent. Documents generated around the time of the visit indicate that the retired Captain George A. Moriarty, who was known to the FBI as somehow both “violently anti-Semitic” and “a harmless windbag,” may have put in a

good word for Moran, helping him secure an invitation to the camp. And army officials were not about to stand in the way of a speaker from a religious organization discussing spiritual matters with the boys. Moran's topic, however, was not so much Lent as anti-Semitism and political grievance. During his lecture, Moran "denounced President Roosevelt and the Jews, stating that they should be treated like traitors." Any citizens who "force us into war should be shot," he raged. When he finally got around to his purported topic, he castigated camp officials for "serving Catholic boys meat on Fridays" in spite of Lenten restrictions and allowing "Jewish boys to have holidays from their duties on Passover." Moran was never asked back to Camp Edwards.⁸

Camp Edwards had become a showcase for Moran's propaganda style. He was seldom a reckless speaker, for he understood that he was involved in a war of words, in which every statement counted. This does not mean that he spoke honestly—far from it. But he was always careful to associate his rumors with a semblance of truth. For example, while there was no indication that Catholic soldiers were in fact served meat on Fridays during Lent, the camp did grant furloughs to Jewish soldiers during Passover. A rumor was more believable when it bore hints of truth.⁹

In his talks at Hibernian Hall, Moran doubled down on the horrors of Camp Edwards. "The Jews have all the soft jobs in the Quartermaster and Medical Corps," he insisted, building on the theme of Jewish cowardice, which had become so prevalent in Catholic circles since the Great War. And as for Jews who weren't pretending to fight for America, "these cheap chiseling rats will profiteer and make a fortune out of the war, even if they have to harm their own country," Moran told a "very enthusiastic crowd." Indeed, the crime of the Jews was much worse than merely profiteering. "They have even sold poisoned food at different camps," Moran alleged without evidence.¹⁰

The idea that Jews were trying to poison American soldiers was flagrant nonsense, absurd even in the universe of anti-Semitic, isolationist conspiracy theories. Here was Moran arguing that Jews were both trying to rope America into war in their own defense and to ensure that America was too enervated to fight. In reality, it was Moran who was trying to depress American military capacity, by eroding confidence in the armed forces and persuading young men not to join up. The strategy was almost certainly developed in concert with Scholz, who was also doing what he could to undermine US warfighting capacity through his birth-certificate scheme, spy recruitments,

and the Johnson rifle ploy. MID knew what Moran was up to—he was speaking in public, after all—although agents failed to connect Moran to Scholz. On April 15, an MID agent secretly attended the Christian Front meeting at Hibernian Hall, where he heard Moran announce that “at US Army camps throughout the United States, men are slowly going insane.” These soldiers, he claimed, were becoming “camp crazy.” This was “due to the fact that they were not used to the manner of life of being thrown in together by the tens of thousands at one place.”¹¹

“According to Moran, there have been many suicides in the military camps recently,” an Anti-Defamation League plant at the same meeting recorded. Two days later, on April 17, Moran claimed “there was another suicide at Camp Edwards,” but, he added, “of course you don’t read that sort of news in the papers.” And there was “a particularly tragic case” at Camp Lee, Virginia. A young draftee, “losing his mind slowly,” walked up to a soldier on guard duty, “wrestled the rifle from his hands, and shot himself in the head.” Moran’s story “got quite a reception from the audience with many Ohs and Ahs.”¹²

Again, Moran’s rumors possessed a veneer of believability. For some time, New Englanders had been hearing that soldiers at Camp Edwards were so cramped that they “tripped over each other on the job.” Multiple press reports indicated that morale at the camp was high, but there was enough confusion surrounding the state of affairs at Edwards for Moran to gain traction. For instance, in March 1941, as Moran’s comments were circulating, camp commanders suddenly and with no explanation dispensed with “fatigue duty,” which included menial work such as cutting wood for fuel, road construction, policing camp, constructing buildings, and digging ditches. For those disposed to Moran’s point of view, it looked like the army was proving his point. Lieutenant Colonel A. R. Bolling, the chief of MID, rebuked Moran for passing “numerous unfounded stories of conditions at Army camps . . . so as to arouse strong feelings against the military and the government.” Bolling played the scold but kept his reports to himself. Moran evaded scrutiny once more.¹³

Moran’s most controversial counter-recruitment spectacle came in June, with the Christian Front’s screening of *Sieg im Westen* (*Victory in the West*). One of the first films to show the German army in action, *Sieg im Westen* was a masterpiece of German propaganda. It had premiered on January 20, 1941, in the projection room of the Reich Chancellery, with Hitler and director Svend Noldan present. Noldan’s specialty was contriving animated

maps to represent Nazi conquest, and the use of rats to represent Jews. His animation style influenced Walt Disney, and his politics won him Hitler's admiration. On the evening of the screening, the director and the führer greeted each other with a warm handshake. "Hitler was visibly impressed by the film," historian Rolf Giesen has written, because much of the content "reminded him of his own time as a soldier in the First World War."¹⁴

The power of *Sieg im Westen* lay in its cinematic treatment of documentary footage. Noldan recut material from newsreels and spliced it with his own animations and artful live-action scenes. Orchestral music and dramatic narration rounded out the "impressionist, emotive, and all-conquering" display, "a blitz of sound and image," as film historian Roger Manvell put it. Hollywood titan Frank Capra was so taken with the craft of *Sieg im Westen* that he later recycled segments of the battle footage for his own propaganda films on behalf of the US war effort, the iconic *Why We Fight* series.¹⁵

Another American captivated by *Sieg im Westen* was Moran. On June 2, 1941, he screened the movie for more than 600 people gathered at Hibernian Hall. As he prepared to roll the tape, he was sure to mention Father Coughlin, "who more than any other man in the United States . . . has been a leader in the creation of public opinion." Then Moran advised the audience that, while there was no English soundtrack, he would provide instantaneous translation and commentary. As the lights dimmed, he offered the last of his preludes: "What you are about to see tonight [is] the power that America is supposed to fight."

For the next hour and a half, Stuka dive bombers, Panzer tanks, and overwhelming numbers of fast-moving Nazi troops enlivened the screen. "During the showing of the film, Moran made several side comments emphasizing the horror of modern warfare and the hopelessness of fighting a mechanized Nazi army." Faced with such power, Moran warned, America should be like "the little boy who minds his own business and doesn't get into a fight unless someone hits him first." As the lights came back on, Moran "urged the women in the audience having sons in the United States Army to write to their sons and tell them what they had seen in the film and to impress upon them the impossibility of any nation defeating the German army now."¹⁶

Word of the screening made it as far as Berlin, where Joseph Goebbels and his aides gleefully recounted how, "after the showing of the German propaganda film *Sieg im Westen* (*Victory in the West*) before a Christian Front audience in Boston, Mr. Francis P. Morton [*sic*], characterized the American

war against Germany as ‘a hopeless conflict . . . and a senseless shedding of blood.’” The US Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which monitored radio transmissions from belligerent countries, picked up on a German radio announcer reveling in Moran’s entreaty to “American mothers [to] oppose military service for their sons.”¹⁷

What was cause for celebration in Berlin provoked outrage in Boston. The Veterans of Foreign Wars publicly censured Moran, and members of the Disabled American Veterans wrote an angry letter to Major Patrick Healy, head of the Massachusetts Censorship Board, arguing that Moran should be thrown in jail. “He asked mothers to become traitors to this country,” the Disabled Veterans charged. They argued that when, on May 27, 1941, President Roosevelt proclaimed an “unlimited national emergency,” Moran became prosecutable under the Espionage Act. Healy, however, believed he had done all he could have. Moran had come to him a week before the screening and was instructed that he could show the film as long as it did not include an English translation. Moran was happy to comply: the film was not heavy on text, and Healy had no idea that Moran could translate as needed. Healy referred legal questions to the FBI, which announced that it could find no federal laws Moran had violated.¹⁸

Nor had Moran violated state laws. On June 4, two days after the screening, leaders of the Disabled Veterans joined counterparts from the VFW and Massachusetts American Legion to draw up a statement of protest and demand that the state punish Moran for failing to obtain a license to show the film. But a local official told the group that Massachusetts had “no jurisdiction over” the screening, because Moran had acquired a sixteen-millimeter version of the film and had not charged admission. A state license was required only for ticketed screenings of thirty-five-millimeter films, which were associated with entertainment. Sixteen-millimeter films were associated with newsreels and so were classed separately. Massachusetts Governor Leverett Saltonstall also demurred. A member of Boston’s Jewish Community Relations Council indicated in a June 4 memo that Saltonstall “felt no action should be taken that could possibly be interpreted as an extralegal suppression of free speech.” In deference to the governor, state and local officials decided “to do nothing further on the matter.”¹⁹

Moran rejoiced in the veterans’ protest. “I would like to show the film to them first of all,” he told a reporter. “Every Legion Post in the country ought to see this film.” Indeed, Moran had every intention of showing the film again.

On June 5 he said he aimed to “make it available to the general public at the earliest possible date, probably later in the next week.”²⁰

Moran’s critics were either unaware of a formidable new legal tool at the federal government’s disposal or were unwilling to contemplate its use. The Smith Act, passed on February 19, 1940, dropped the wartime parameter of the Espionage Act and criminalized any “intent to interfere with, impair, or influence the loyalty, morale, or discipline of the military or naval forces of the United States.” Specifically, it was unlawful to “advise, counsel, or urge in any manner insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty by any member of the military or naval forces of the United States.”²¹ Moran’s statements during and after the June 2, 1941, screening—in particular his explicit urging that mothers depress their serving sons with tales of German military might—were construable as violations of the Smith Act.

But if the VFW could be forgiven for omitting a Smith Act analysis, and if state officials were powerless to enforce a federal law, it is harder to look charitably on the federal intelligence and law enforcement agents who turned a blind eye. The Military Intelligence Division had an eyewitness at the June 2 screening, but the agent’s report made no mention of Moran’s entreaty to mothers of enlisted sons. And while MID was ignoring the evidence of a Smith Act violation, the FBI was seemingly rewriting the law to suit its ideological predilections. Hoover was deeply invested in the Smith Act and understood the fearsome power it represented, but he saw the law, in spite of its language, only as a weapon against Communists.²²

Attorney General Francis Biddle also opposed the idea of prosecuting Moran for seditious activity, under the Smith Act or any other statute. He informed Hoover that no such charges should be on the table, and Hoover passed the message along to Peterson in Boston, writing, “the Attorney General indicated his unwillingness to authorize prosecutions for sedition.” Just a year after the disastrous New York trial, Biddle was not willing to consider another Christian Front sedition trial. Ironically, Biddle would later spearhead Smith Act charges against frontier Joe McWilliams and twenty-nine others, a case that became derisively known as the Great Sedition Trial. The trial lives in infamy as an example of prosecutorial overreach. The government struggled for years to bring forward a coherent argument, and the case ended in a mistrial. In comparison to the McWilliams case, Moran’s was cut-and-dried.²³

But even if Hoover was not able to pursue a sedition prosecution, he was keen to pin some kind of charge on Moran. Hoover had every incentive to at

least appear engaged in the Moran case, as many officials in powerful positions were suddenly curious about the Christian Front's activities. For instance, Hoover heard from Arkansas Representative David Terry, who took an immediate interest after learning of the film screening. Terry asked Hoover to investigate Moran and advise about any findings at the "earliest opportunity." Normally a three-term congressman from a Southern state fretting about an incident in Massachusetts would not have Hoover overly concerned. Terry, however, was a member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, and nothing made Hoover move faster than the prospect of budget cuts.²⁴

Hoover got creative. One avenue of possible criminality lay in the origins of the film. Had it been imported illegally? US Customs informed Hoover that they had tracked the film since its arrival at Brownsville, Texas, in March 1941. Because *Sieg im Westen* was neither obscene nor "advocated the overthrow of the United States government," no law prevented its distribution in the United States. Still, it could not have been easy for Moran to obtain the film. The German Foreign Office and the Wehrmacht had restricted foreign distribution to military attachés and diplomats.²⁵

Moran was not a military attaché or a diplomat, but finally some well-placed observers were beginning to wonder if he was working for one. One of those observers was Reverend Leon Birkhead, founder of the liberal group Friends of Democracy. On June 5, he telegraphed Secretary of State Cordell Hull with a question: "Has Francis P. Moran, leader of the Christian Front in the Boston area, registered as a propaganda agent of a foreign power?" Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, Moran was required to inform the government that he was working for Scholz, which he had never done. The prosecutorial standard for conviction under FARA was high. In Moran's case, officials would have to catch him in the act of taking direction or resources from Scholz. But the idea of a FARA prosecution struck a nerve. Two weeks after the screening, Hull told the press that, since hearing from Birkhead, he "was keeping a careful watch over propaganda material . . . to determine whether the Foreign Agents Registration Act had been complied with."²⁶

Moran responded forcefully, and with his usual rhetorical cleverness, in his own statement to reporters. "If I am a Nazi agent because I dared to show that the German army is too strong for us to get mixed up with," he thundered, "then all those people who are sponsoring British relief are working for the British government." Moran also picked up on the involvement of Birkhead who, as a political enemy, was a ready foil. Moran could dispense with

the allegation by implying that Birkhead was grinding an ideological axe, and on behalf of Communists, no less. “I shall be the first to volunteer to defend us against the Nazis,” Moran said. “May I ask Reverend Birkhead whether he would volunteer to fight against Russia?”²⁷

A bit of red-baiting might have been enough to shut down Birkhead, but Moran was now attracting scrutiny from powerful officials who would not be so easily dissuaded. It is particularly important that attention was coming from the likes of Secretary of State Hull, as the State Department had been a major obstacle to investigations of German officials in the United States, thereby preventing revelations about their agents. If the State Department was interested in knowing more about men like Moran, there could be serious trouble ahead for Scholz as well, and for other Americans working for Nazi diplomats. Adolf Berle Jr., assistant secretary of state and a close advisor to FDR, seemed to share Hull’s worries. He pushed Hoover to get Peterson “to determine if Francis P. Moran acted as an agent of a foreign principal.” Hoover—who had always taken German spies seriously, even if he did not feel the Smith Act was an appropriate response—was enthusiastic. The *Sieg im Westen* affair was turning into a black eye for the FBI, but a FARA prosecution might be just the healing ointment needed.²⁸

One obvious investigative direction involved, again, the film itself. But this proved a dead end. As Moran freely admitted to a *Boston Globe* reporter, he acquired his copy of *Sieg im Westen* from Ufa Films, Inc. Moran even gave the reporter the company’s street address—1270 6th Avenue, New York City. Ufa, short for *Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft*, was indeed a foreign agency. It was under the majority ownership of the German government and was controlled by Goebbels. But, as Hoover came to understand, Ufa was “registered with the Secretary of State as an agent of a foreign principal.” Not only that, but in its FARA application to the State Department, Ufa described its purpose as “the production, distribution, release, and exhibition of motion pictures.” In other words, Ufa was operating legally in the United States; it could not be prosecuted for doing precisely what it had received approval to do, nor could its customers be held liable for taking advantage of its approved services.²⁹

Berle told Hoover to keep digging. The FBI director ordered Peterson to send agents to interview Christian Front members about Moran’s possible association with foreign agents, and for once Peterson seemed inclined to act. He assigned J. W. Coulter and J. H. Foley, agents experienced in national

security matters, to investigate. During the late 1930s, the two agents had done a masterful job of creating contacts inside Boston's America First Committee. One of those contacts admitted that her daughter "had attended meetings of the Christian Front, and might possibly have given money to Moran at one time." Coulter and Foley moved quickly to interview her. But the woman had nothing useful to say concerning a secret partnership of which she had no knowledge. She "stated that she knew Mr. Moran personally and considered him a very excellent character who would never stoop so low as to accept money from any foreign government in order to carry out the activities of the Christian Front." In frustration, Coulter became rather ruthless. Unbeknownst to Moran, Coulter scoured his bank account, scrutinized his loans, examined his mortgage, delved into his elderly mother's finances, and initiated a mail cover—at Coulter's request, the Boston Post Office recorded all information on the outside of parcels addressed to Moran. A mail cover is a common investigative technique that does not require the securing of a warrant. In fact, Moran's FBI file does not include a single warrant application. The financial information was voluntarily divulged by bankers.³⁰

Coulter's probe came to nothing, and two months after its initial screening, Moran showed the film for a second time at Hibernian Hall. Press coverage "fails to say that the audience cheered Hitler whenever his picture appeared on the screen," a confidential informant reported to Peterson. Moran translated between the cheering. "His German translations were flavored with subtlety," the informant noted. Such subtlety was beginning to annoy Hoover. Foiled at every turn, he acted out, all but threatening to fire Peterson. That Moran could still move freely around Boston reflected "unfavorably on the Bureau," Hoover told Peterson. It would look especially bad "if every effort is not exerted on the part of your office to gather all evidence which is available," the FBI director added menacingly. Hoover sent Peterson at least three letters in fall 1941, pressing the slow-moving special agent to find some crime Moran had committed, but Peterson made no progress. Perhaps he had better things to do. He had agreed to teach a course at Harvard for New England police officials on "the investigation of espionage . . . and subversive activities."³¹

"Heil Hitler!": The Front in Late 1941

On June 16 FDR threw down the hammer and ordered the closure of all German consulates in the United States. A note from Deputy Undersecre-

tary of State Sumner Welles accused German diplomats of “activities of an improper and unwarranted character, inimical to the welfare of the country” and “wholly outside the scope of their legitimate duties.” Scholz would have until July 10 to pack his bags and leave.³²

As soon as the news broke, a gaggle of reporters clamored outside the consulate on Chestnut Street in Beacon Hill. Scholz greeted them at the door, “beaming and rubbing his hands together.” He projected an easy air, seeming to treat the whole situation as a farce. “Consulate Closing Huge Joke,” the *Boston Herald* reported. “Scholz just laughs and laughs.” Perhaps Scholz was beaming and laughing because Moran, of course, would not be coming with him. Scholz knew he could rely on his agent.³³

That confidence was well placed, as Moran spent the second half of 1941 churning out Nazi propaganda even though Scholz was bound for distant shores. In his July circulars, Moran continued to harp on Roosevelt. FDR’s destroyers-for-bases deal, concluded by executive order, was despicable: neither Congress nor ordinary American citizens were consulted about the plan, which saw the United States transferring military technology to Britain in exchange for basing rights in British territories. Here again Moran was delivering a civic argument, not a religious one—a sign that Scholz’s lessons had stuck. Moran’s position was that the president was “ignoring his duty to consider the welfare of our own country first.” Moran also alleged that FDR, if left unchecked, would create a “post-war League of Nations” because “he wants no national boundaries or national loyalties.”³⁴

As far as Moran, the unregistered foreign agent, was concerned, his own national loyalty was incontestable. His position was not unlike Cassidy’s when the New York front leader, from the witness stand, argued that he was not a revolutionary, even though he was trying to take over the government and replace it with a new one. Both men understood themselves to be protectors of the true America, whatever the law required or whomever the people elected. Moran and Cassidy saw no irony in calling out others for treason, foreign allegiances, and anti-Americanism generally, because their intentions were, by their own lights, patriotic. Loyalty did not entail an obligation to follow just laws, support the whole community, or solve problems through the political process. Loyalty was a matter of the heart, and Moran and Cassidy decided that their hearts were pure.

Indeed, just a few days after the consular expulsion order, Moran could feel purer of heart than he had for some time. On June 22, 1941, Operation

Barbarossa commenced. About 3 million Axis and Axis-aligned soldiers, the largest land invasion force in the history of warfare, opened an eastern front against the Soviet Union. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was over. The Germans were at last fighting the red devil himself, and Moran would no longer have to tiptoe awkwardly around the unconscionable Nazi-Communist alliance. The following day, from the stage at Hibernian Hall, Moran shouted, “No matter what Hitler may have done in the past, anywhere, any time, I could kiss him for what he has done.” I “could kiss him every hour of the day in spite of his mustache.” Manic with joy, Moran grabbed a glass of water and offered a toast. “For what Hitler has done, and for what he is doing, for what he will do—I say ‘Heil Hitler.’”³⁵

An Anti-Defamation League plant at the meeting recorded Moran’s “Heil Hitler” remarks and made sure copies of the report were sent to both Lieutenant Colonel Bolling at MID and to Peterson.³⁶ Peterson, who must have taken a new interest in Moran, had his own informant on hand for the June 23 meeting. The informant arrived just in time for Moran’s kissing-Hitler speech. “If he weren’t Irish, he would certainly seem German,” this rather spacey new FBI informant concluded.³⁷

At a meeting held the evening before Scholz’s post was due to close, Moran “spoke angrily of the German Consul being sent home.” In fact Scholz was not headed to Germany. Scholz’s next assignment was to the German legation in Budapest, where his fluent Hungarian would come in handy. Miklós Horthy, regent of the Kingdom of Hungary, was ambivalent about Hitler and reluctant to accept his status as a Nazi client. He also scuffled with the Nazis over Jewish deportations to the death camps. Himmler must have thought Scholz had done well in the United States, if his next job was to be such a delicate one.

An FBI report from 1942 indicates that Scholz spent his last evening in Boston with Moran. It was a dangerous move. No longer protected by the State Department, Scholz must have expected that he was under intensive surveillance. That he would risk exposing his asset demonstrates how important Moran had become to the Nazi project in the United States: meeting with Moran was a matter of urgency—otherwise it would not have happened. Clearly the men took great pains to maintain secrecy, because the FBI had no idea about the meeting until more than a year later, when an informant dragged the story out of Moran. At this final liaison, Scholz urged Moran to keep up his work, assuring the Christian Front leader that the cause was not

lost and he would soon return. Scholz predicted a rout of the Allies. He had put his furniture in storage rather than sell it, confident that he would be back within five years. Scholz also guaranteed that he “never talked in the presence of the consulate secretaries,” fearing FBI plants, and that all of his “confidential files” had been burned. Moran was likely gratified when he read that the consulate’s tony neighbors on Beacon Hill had called the fire department to complain of smoke emanating from the building. The *Globe* reported that “Lieutenant John Hoar of Engine #10 went to the consulate and found the smoke and sparks were caused by attachés burning papers in the furnace.”³⁸

Moran kept the sparks flying in Boston. At one summer 1941 Christian Front meeting, he told his audience that FDR needed to be “removed from office by force and violence” after he had treasonously ordered the US occupation of Iceland. Moran spent much of the second half of 1941 on a tour of the East Coast, parts of the Midwest, and Canada, spreading the message that war against Germany was futile. He “travels all over New England,” an FBI source reported, where he “talked with everyone from the mayor of a town down to the chambermaid and the local barber.” He told Canadians that the fighter planes the United States had sent their way for delivery to Britain “had to be rearmed because the American guns were defective.”³⁹

On August 29 Moran traveled to Scotch Plains, New Jersey, for a key meeting with the publisher George Sylvester Viereck. Viereck was not shy about his pro-Nazi views. In 1923 he had been one of the first journalists to interview Hitler. Viereck gazed “into Hitler’s ‘magnetic blue eyes,’ and characterized him as a superman.”⁴⁰ In 1939 Viereck established Flanders Hall Publishers to generate Nazi propaganda pamphlets, of which Moran was a distributor. There is every indication that Stempel and Viereck worked together to get the materials to Moran.⁴¹ But in 1941 it was Moran who came to Viereck, with the intent to effectively take over his operation. Apparently Moran “received a tip” that Flanders Hall was soon to close down. He later divulged that he purchased the pamphlets “to keep them out of the hands of British and the Jews, who wished to destroy them”—such a tip must have come either from Nazi intelligence or from a Nazi sympathizer inside US intelligence or law enforcement. If the tip was from German intelligence, this was a sign that Moran was being promoted, taking over Viereck’s role as chief propagandist in the region. However he learned of the coming closure, Moran arrived in Scotch Plains with an ambitious agenda: he bought as many

volumes as he could, returning to Boston with 16,000 copies of Viereck's works. Five weeks after striking his deal with Moran, Viereck was in handcuffs, about to stand trial for failing to register as a foreign agent. After a number of prosecutorial stumbles, he was finally convicted under FARA in 1944 and would spend three years in prison.⁴²

Moran, demonstrating his always-keen business sense, repackaged the pamphlets into books and used Christian Front members as a salesforce. He took one each of Viereck's seventeen different pamphlets and bound them into a single volume priced at four dollars, a hefty sum but perhaps worth it to fans of Nazi literature. Fronters would buy the books and resell them. A Christian Front member who spoke to the FBI said Moran "urged us all to buy as many as we can, and sell as many as we can." Recognizing that Viereck was under indictment for publishing the very works that he was now distributing, Moran asked Christian Front members to conduct their sales discreetly, "otherwise, you can send me cigarettes in jail!"⁴³

Moran spent the rest of 1941 castigating Jews and calling on his clerical supporters to preach the gospel of anti-Semitism. On October 20, at "an unusually large meeting—so crowded that chairs were placed in the aisles," Moran described "the Jews" as "a hindrance and a source of evil to any country that held them." Sounding a novel and disturbing genocidal note, he exclaimed that "there could be no room for two religions at odds with each other." Strangely, he added that "court records would show how evil the Jews really were." Perhaps Moran was suggesting that one day the Jews would be duly tried for their crimes. It is a delusion reminiscent of the New York fronters. They thought they would seed America's next government; likewise, Moran seemed to think that, in a just world to come, his law would reign.⁴⁴

The following week, October 27, the Christian Front met for an evening with Father Brophy, who injected a bit of religion into meetings that were now dominated by antiwar agitation rather than sermonizing. Even the Judeo-Bolshevist threat to Christianity had been receiving short shrift, as Moran focused instead on the Jewish threat to Germany and the conspiracy of Jewish bankers and sympathetic politicians peddling war. Audiences no doubt appreciated this sort of talk, even though it emerged from the Nazi playbook more than that of Catholic anti-Semitism. Those were the wages of Coughlin's style of human rights, after all. But the crowd—to say nothing of Moran himself—still hungered for the holy word. When Father Brophy entered Hibernian Hall, "there was a tremendous ovation, everybody standing up." He

received another ovation after he was introduced. “The audience rose cheering and applauded most enthusiastically.”

Taking the stage with Bible in hand, Brophy began to read—from all four Gospels—the story of Christ and Barabbas, the murderer whom Pilate released in response to the exhortation of the crowd at the crucifixion. The story was an important one in the annals of Catholic anti-Semitism, for it seemed to show a mob of Jews demanding clemency for a criminal and execution for Christ. After a dramatic pause, Brophy asked, “Is it a sin to hate the Jews?” “Can you love a man who prefers the killer Barabbas?” “Can you love a race which is leading us to war because Barabbas is chosen over Christ?” Brophy did not have to use Moran’s increasingly secular rhetoric to reach the same conclusions. “Let them fight their own battles,” Brophy resolved. An FBI plant at the meeting noted that the priest “damned the Jews in a perfectly nice religious way.”⁴⁵

That said, like Moran, Father Brophy had made his peace with Nazism. An Anti-Defamation League operative in attendance on October 27 wrote of Brophy, “He didn’t feel that there was any danger in Nazism, declaring that the real danger was Marxism.” Brophy knew what he was getting into. “I will be called a Nazi for that statement—but that doesn’t disturb me,” he confessed. “I have been called a Nazi before.”⁴⁶ Here again, the Roman Catholic synergy with Nazism was more a function of shared anti-Communism than theological overlap. Brophy could never have given credence to the pantheistic and mystical elements of Nazism, but Brophy absolutely could have agreed “that the two ‘faiths’ [Nazism and Roman Catholicism] shared enough common enemies—Communism . . . anarchism, Judaism . . . alleged social and moral decadence—to make collaboration fruitful,” as the historian Roger Griffin put it. Moran may have taken a reminder from Brophy. By November, with Nazi Field Marshal Erwin Rommel racing across Egypt, Moran was tempering his June remarks about kissing Hitler and instead presenting Christian collusion with Nazis as a matter of compromise. “It is not that we love the devil in brown,” he wrote in a Thanksgiving postcard to Christian Front members, “but we hate the devil in red much more.”⁴⁷

That was the last Thanksgiving before the war fully and finally came to the United States. At this point, Moran had seemingly survived just about everything that could be thrown at him. He had gained and lost many patrons and come out in fine form. He had the support of friendly priests and a slew of books to sell. He had found a happy medium between Christ and

Hitler that served his intellectual and political needs and kept him publicly relevant. Usually, his role as a religious figure protected him from legal scrutiny. And when the First Amendment was not enough, he found clever workarounds. Moran could see that government officials were on his case, but he seemed to know the law better than they did and had the confidence to press ahead while they fumbled. Other foes might be more capable, though. Moran would soon find out just how capable, when British spies came for him.