

## CHAPTER 10

### Questions of the Most Delicate Kind

“I DO NOT RECOMMEND VIOLENCE,” MORAN BOOMED TO HIS CHRISTIAN Fronters. Specifically, he was not recommending violence against the Irish American Defense Association (IADA), a new organization in town. IADA wanted “to let the world know, and the president in particular, that Irish-Americans were behind the administration’s policy.” The front devoted its meeting of December 1, 1941, to planning for IADA’s inaugural gathering, scheduled for the fateful day of December 7 at Faneuil Hall.

“All good Irish-Americans are definitely opposed to the president’s policy,” Moran told the fronters. Then he “paused very effectively,” according to an observer who shared his thoughts in a letter to Reverend Walton E. Cole, a Boston minister who was wary of Moran. During that dramatic pause, mumbling could be heard throughout the hall. Small groups of fronters seemed to be discussing creative ways by which they could break up the IADA meeting. Looking around from the stage, Moran understood what was happening. He then “as would a very capable actor, threw kisses to the crowd . . . and the crowd cheered loudly.”<sup>1</sup>

Moran had a plan of his own. Fronters would arrive early and occupy most of the seats. Then a boisterous walkout was to take place. When the day of the IADA event came, the fronters followed their leader. One eyewitness described “the concerted effort of a group of people walking out.” In the middle of the meeting, “a large number of persons arose from their seats with boeing and raucous laughter” and “moved slowly away.” “Several scores of hecklers

stormed from the auditorium,” the *Boston Herald* reported. The front’s antics were, as one letter to the *Boston Globe* put it, a “dreadful symbol.” Just a few hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Moran and the Christian Front did not pause to honor the more than 2,400 Americans who had been killed. They went through with their plan and disrupted the meeting.<sup>2</sup>

IADA’s emcee that evening was an inconspicuous Bostonian named Frances Sweeney. She wanted to keep a low profile and declined to speak herself. She had been working diligently behind the scenes for weeks to bring the meeting together, only to hear it crash around her, amid jeering about “the Jews who have gotten us into this war” and “President Roosevelt, that tool of the international Jews.” Sweeney confessed to a friend that the walkout “left me with my Irish so far up it could never come down.”<sup>3</sup>

Sweeney was well connected among Boston’s liberal intelligentsia and had solid contacts in the news business. But she was not a public figure, and few knew anything about her murky organization. Among those who were familiar with IADA, however, there was a good deal of suspicion. In New York, *The Irish Advocate* argued that IADA was “fake,” suggesting “there is very little Irish about it except the green ink in which it prints some of its literature.” The Boston Central Council of Irish County Associations passed a resolution sharply criticizing IADA, which had formed independently of the council and was unknown to it. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, perhaps the most important Irish-American political organization, was skeptical, again because they knew nothing about the group. In the wake of the December 7 meeting, when Bostonians at large found out about IADA, one wrote to the *Globe* expressing his view that the last thing the city needed was another neighborhood political association.<sup>4</sup>

Some skeptics were not sure that IADA actually was a neighborhood political association. Burton Wheeler, a US senator from Montana, thought IADA was nothing more than “an outfit organized . . . to stir up Irish-Americans for war.” When Wheeler was asked by a reporter about IADA’s announcement that it would not be seeking contributions, the senator scowled, “They don’t need any contributions—their expenses will be paid by England . . . or out of the lend-lease money.” Like many in official Washington, Wheeler strongly suspected that the British were involved in intelligence activities in the United States, in particular that FDR’s newly established Office of the Coordinator of Information was a British “mentoring”

project within the US government. But Wheeler was easily dismissed as a partisan with an axe to grind. Formerly an FDR supporter, the senator changed his mind after the court-packing scheme of 1937. Wheeler then became one of the most vociferous isolationists in the Senate. He once described the Lend-Lease Act as “the New Deal’s Triple-A foreign policy to plow under every fourth American boy.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet Wheeler’s instincts concerning IADA were dead on. The organization was in fact a creation of British intelligence, in its effort to sway American opinion toward the war. Sweeney was like Moran in that both were agents of foreign powers, yet genuinely committed to their ideologies and policy goals. Both were also devout Catholics who were moved to their political positions by their interpretations of the Gospel, by the call of Catholic social action, and by their own life experiences. But Sweeney and Moran differed in a key way: Moran knew he was a foreign agent; Sweeney did not know that she was.

As far as Sweeney knew, she was developing her own agenda—influenced by her associates, perhaps, but not by a handler. She executed that agenda through persuasion, skilled organizing, and masterful manipulation of the press. Where Moran stood on stages and held forth, Sweeney wrote letters to news publishers, dunned business leaders behind closed doors, brought together influential people in close quarters, and fed carefully timed stories to the papers. Her schemes were based on superior knowledge of the Boston political and media landscape and on her singular determination to undo the Christian Front and suppress anti-Semitic and Fascist sentiment broadly.

Yet Sweeney was working for an organization both funded and founded by British intelligence. Unwittingly, she was in frequent contact with a person who was, quite wittingly, working for the British. The exact identity of this go-between—referred to, in the parlance of the spy world, as a cutout—has never been established. It must have been a confidante of Sweeney’s: someone whom she trusted, with whom she was willing to share plans, and from whom she was prone to take guidance. In other words, the cutout was almost certainly a true friend of Sweeney’s, whom the British tasked with recruiting, monitoring, and assisting IADA’s leader.

The construction of IADA was a byzantine process involving a heap of UK intelligence agencies nested within each other and interacting via coded messages. Before and during World War II, the British spy apparatus, like the German, was vastly more capable than that of the United States, hence the

installation of the Coordinator of Information as a British mentee. Boston, perceived as critical to the development of US public opinion because of the strong anti-British sentiment among the city's politically powerful Irish American community, became a front line in the war, even as no shots were fired there. Even today, Americans are largely unaware of the extent of British and German espionage across the United States as both powers struggled either to prod Americans into the war or keep them on the sidelines.

This black-ops contest was perhaps nowhere more urgent than in Boston, where Sweeney faced off with the Christian Front. The bitter irony of Sweeney's effort is that as soon as she exposed Moran as a Nazi propagandist, the Boston Police swooped in and interrupted. Finally a law-enforcement agency was putting the fight to Moran. Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that the police, who had long been allies of the front, were still on his side. In January 1942, officers did shut down the Christian Front. But Commissioner Joseph Timilty disrupted more serious investigations at the federal level. And he so clearly violated Moran's civil liberties that he imperiled any chance for prosecution. Ultimately the two would reach a deal to save each other.

### A Secret History

IADA was born in New York, at 8 West 40th Street, founded by Christopher Emmet, an American and a longtime British intelligence contact. The idea was to contest John Cassidy and the Christian Front. Emmet's group enjoyed good publicity and was well funded, but once the Christian Front was cut down to size in New York, IADA lost its sense of purpose and began to look like a rather pointless speech-making organization headed by wealthy elites. Historian Thomas Mahl, one of the few who has written about IADA, concluded that, if the group was a British spy asset, it was an ineffectual one, "reduced to whining about 'vicious attacks by the Coughlinitic Irish Organizations and Press.'"<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, the same year Mahl's book was released, readers gained access to a landmark compendium of formerly classified British intelligence documents, which showed with certainty that IADA was indeed a UK asset. This compendium, *British Security Coordination: The Secret History of British Intelligence in the Americas, 1940–1945*, presented a selective history of British Security Coordination (BSC), the US umbrella organization of the British

Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6. BSC had a robust US presence, with offices located in New York City's Rockefeller Center. The provenance of the material contained in the book is vague. As the story goes, in 1945 the chief of BSC in the United States, Sir William Stephenson, arranged for all of BSC's files to be moved, under armed guard, to Canada. At Camp X, outside of Toronto, three British intelligence officers tasked by Stephenson read the files and distilled them into a single-volume history of BSC, containing accounts of British spying success in North America and Latin America.

But even successful spying is not necessarily suitable for public revelation. Just twenty copies of the history were produced and bound, and the archive itself was destroyed. After the volume was completed to Stephenson's satisfaction, one of its compilers was "instructed to collect the entire BSC archive and burn it . . . thereby ensuring that the twenty printed copies were the only extant historical record of BSC." Eight copies were distributed among President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and other principals. Of the remaining twelve copies, Stephenson ordered ten burned. This was done in 1946, at a farm near Montreal.<sup>7</sup> Stephenson retained the last two copies for himself, marked them "Top Secret," and locked them in a bank vault. Editing his own archive via matchstick, Stephenson was not only creating a chronicle of the successes of BSC but potentially expurgating material that might have embarrassed BSC or run afoul of US law.<sup>8</sup>

The 1998 *Secret History* contains eleven paragraphs on IADA, but none of them pertain to its operations in Boston. Rather, the *Secret History's* discussion of IADA focuses on the organization's work pressing the US government to in turn press Ireland itself, which was officially neutral. Both BSC and the United States were never successful in changing that position, although Ireland did at times, without publicity, assist the Allies. Scholars who have written about IADA since 1998 have invariably adopted this theme, viewing IADA as focused on affecting Irish policy. Both the secret history and subsequent authors overlooked IADA's domestic role, including Sweeney's war with the Christian Front.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible that some US writers have, for some time, known more about IADA than they have let on. In September 1989, eight months after Stephenson's death, a 423-page document entitled "British Security Coordination (BSC): An Account of Secret Activities in the Western Hemisphere, 1940–1945," was turned over to CIA historian Thomas F. Troy and *Washington Post*

defense reporter David Ignatius. The source of the 423-page document is unknown. Drawing on what he found in the document, Ignatius published the bombshell article “Britain’s War in America.” There is no way of knowing if the 423-page document reviewed by Ignatius contained the same material as Stephenson’s last two locked volumes and whether and how this material differs from what appears in the *Secret History*. Ignatius considered what he found in the 423-page document a “shocking” disclosure of the means by which British intelligence “manipulated” US public opinion prior to Pearl Harbor.<sup>10</sup> Other US journalists, Mike Wallace and George Crile III, have come to similar conclusions concerning British propaganda efforts in the United States. In 1979 Wallace and Crile produced “Target: America,” a TV pilot in which former US and British spies talked about BSC. The reporters were stunned by the “dirty tricks and smear campaigns” the British used to discredit antiwar Americans and “get the United States directly involved in World War II.” Britain’s espionage and covert propaganda operations even seemed to have the approval of President Roosevelt. All the networks balked at the pilot, though. A few years after Watergate, media organizations were not ready to impeach another American president—even in the court of historical memory—and especially not one so admired as Roosevelt.<sup>11</sup>

With journalists either shut down or closely guarding sources they were not authorized to share, it was not until 2016 that a large quantity of reliable information involving BSC’s stateside activities was made available. In that year the UK National Archives released a sizable tranche of files from a wartime agency called the Special Operations Executive. SOE was created on the orders of Winston Churchill in July 1940, with the purpose of promoting resistance groups in German-occupied areas. In Churchill’s famous phrase, SOE would “set Europe ablaze.” But not just Europe. In practice SOE was neither strictly focused on Europe nor solely interested in sabotage and subversion. From the start SOE operated globally and placed officers with BSC in the United States. SOE also incorporated a British intelligence unit called Electra House, which cultivated “black propaganda”—information purported to be from a trusted source on the target’s own side. Black propaganda was precisely Moran’s specialty while working for Scholz.<sup>12</sup>

This is where IADA comes in. If the Christian Front became a black propaganda outfit for the Nazis, IADA was a black propaganda outfit for the British. This becomes clear in SOE’s files—files that Stephenson could not burn. The BSC archive is gone for good, save for the materials chronicled in the *Secret*

*History.* But the SOE archive contains loads of BSC documents, thanks to the many SOE operatives who were working for Stephenson. As of 2016, those documents are available to us. They reveal a BSC quite different from the one appearing in Stephenson's official *Secret History*. Historian Keith Jeffrey, author of an authorized history of MI6, wrote that "the BSC Official History of 1945 [was] clearly designed to show the organization in the best possible light." The papers released in 2016 reveal something more morally ambiguous. The goals of the real BSC were the same as the one presented in the official history: to induce the United States to join the war. But the methods and attitudes of BSC were not entirely admirable. The agency implemented a robust and entirely undetected clandestine effort in the United States, in which Americans were very much pawns in a game of foreign powers.<sup>13</sup>

The results, as is seemingly inevitable in covert operations, were mixed. From the standpoint of spy craft, BSC's efforts in the United States were often masterful. But many laws were broken, and many lives were ruined. In Boston, Stephenson's campaign of deception generated ripple effects, including violence and civil rights violations. The effort to take down Moran by any means necessary would eventually undermine Jewish-Catholic relations in the city. This was irrelevant, however, from the perspective of British intelligence. BSC understood itself to be at war in the United States, and every war breeds collateral damage.

### Battlefield America

As far as BSC was concerned, there was no such thing as American neutrality. The United States was in the conflict long before Pearl Harbor—not as a belligerent but as a theater of action in a propaganda war. Thus one of BSC's tasks was "combatting hostile (American or neutral) influences in the Americas." As the British officer Colonel Sir Geoffrey Vickers wrote in a chilling report for SOE, "The first essential is to regard the U.S.A. as a battlefield and to realize that as it becomes increasingly involved in war it may become more of a battlefield."

Vickers compiled his report after visiting New York in February 1941, at the same time the Democratic-led House of Representatives passed the Lend-Lease Act in a landslide. It might, then, have seemed that the battle for America had been won. Undoubtedly Lend-Lease had its critics, yet the balance of public opinion was in favor, and the largely party-line vote in the

House indicated that the outcome in the Democratic-controlled Senate was not in doubt. Yet Vickers was not convinced that the United States was truly in Britain's camp. "The confused, unstable, yet powerful forces of American opinion are being continually manipulated by pressures, applied by groups of all kinds," he wrote. "Beneath and sometimes under cover of . . . domestic issues, the war is being fought incessantly with weapons varying from humanitarian appeals to knives and poison." Britain would never resort to knives and poison in battlefield America, but pressure and manipulation were very much arrows in BSC's quiver. British intelligence, no less than its German counterpart, aimed to win the contest for American hearts and minds.<sup>14</sup>

To this end, Irish Americans were an early focus of British agents. In spring 1941 Electra House prepared "Notes on Irish-American Opinion," a secret report that argued "Irish America was still a potent influence" on political life in the United States, and that Irish Americans, if left un placated, could harm the British war effort. Electra House regarded "the Irish dog as sleeping but not dead . . . if it howled loud enough it might arouse a measure of general sympathy." Sympathy for the Irish was not typically in Britain's interest.

If Britain was to secure America's support in the war—if, above all, it was to secure a military alliance—then Westminster would have to take the Irish question seriously on both sides of the Atlantic. Electra House made a number of recommendations. One recommendation was that Britain refrain from occupying Irish ports. The idea of seizing Irish ports was a radical one, but some quarters in London had for years considered it an option in the event of another world war. Electra House argued that such a course of action would have disastrous effects in American politics, swaying Congress and the White House against the UK position. Another recommendation was a carefully tailored black propaganda operation. "Overt propaganda activity," the report warned, "is both risky and superfluous." But "propaganda by qualified Americans . . . might well be effective."<sup>15</sup>

Boston was of particular importance in the battle for Irish American opinion. The Electra House report identified Boston as the "rallying point" for anti-British sentiment in the United States and singled out "Cardinal O'Connell . . . as an ancient monument to implacability." Agents on the ground would soon confirm that Irish Boston was a major obstacle to British interests. When William Agar—a former Columbia University geology professor and World War I pilot, and a BSC operative—delivered a speech at Faneuil Hall in May 1941 aiming to convince US Austrian Catholics to unite

against Hitler, he found it was Irish Catholics, not Austrians, who were the problem in New England. Agar left Boston shaken by his experience with the “violent isolationism” of local Irish Catholics, but also convinced that something needed to be done about the situation.<sup>16</sup>

One Irish Catholic Bostonian who spurred British intelligence to action was Father Michael Ahern, who had provided theological cover to Moran in 1940. In July 1941 he went public with more of his ruminations. This time, the Jesuit scientist was the subject of a *Boston Globe* piece in which he “called Communism and Nazism two of a kind.” He elaborated on the point while speaking at Harvard University’s Littauer Center. “Both ideologies deny the rights of the individual soul, both reject spiritual values, both are vowed to the destruction of the Judeo-Christian outlook on life and on the value of life.”<sup>17</sup>

Ahern was not aligning with the Scholz-era Christian Front. He was making a serious theological argument against Nazism, in addition to Communism. But BSC was not a talk shop. Nor did its agents see much advantage in equating Nazism and Communism. The fact was that, at this point in the war, allying with Britain meant allying with the Soviets as well. A month earlier, the Axis had broken off the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Stalin was now working with the British and was receiving American Lend-Lease aid. Calling out Hitler and Stalin in the same breath was at best a motion for neutrality, which was as good as useless. The Boston Irish would never swing toward Britain if they were listening to the likes of Ahern.

Five days after the *Globe* published its Ahern story, the wheels started turning at BSC’S New York office. “We are considering formation of [an] Irish-American group to defend democracy,” an unsigned telegram to MI6 in London read. “We can probably secure twelve prominent Irish Americans to start this group.” The telegram ended with a line that would have horrified every rank-and-file member of the Christian Front: “There is a chance now of obtaining active support here from Irish Communists.” The message was addressed to A.C.C.S., the codename for MI6 Deputy Chief Claude Dansey.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of A.C.C.S., the reply, two days later, came from a source identified as U. U recommended caution with respect to “the possible use of . . . the Irish Communists in America” to carry out SOE’s black propaganda. “This obviously raises questions of the most delicate kind.” But U signaled tacit approval for a Communist-free propaganda campaign directed at Irish Americans by acknowledging that the proposal had been “passed on to 48000,”

the code name of Stephenson, who was away from New York at the time. It is likely that U was a high-ranking figure, probably Alexander Cadogan, the permanent undersecretary of foreign affairs. Cadogan is known to have “paid serious attention to intelligence,” historians Christopher Andrew and David Dilks have written. Cadogan had also read and been “very interested” in the Electra House report. In its own delicate way, the exchange makes clear that the Irish American black propaganda scheme was getting top-level consideration in London.<sup>19</sup>

Within a week of U’s reply, Irish Catholics in Boston were being spied on. According to a declassified BSC report, William Agar was dispatched to Boston once more, this time “to soften Cardinal O’Connell and his mouthpiece, Ahern.” Apparently Agar gave a speech in Boston “attacking Ahern’s stand,” but the address was totally ignored in the press. Nevertheless, BSC was encouraged and believed that Ahern was beginning to modify what the agency uncharitably described as “his previous pro-Nazi, anti-English stand.” The after-action report on Agar’s trip urged British intelligence to continue focusing on Boston. “We should keep up this sort of pounding in that area particularly as Ahern slips back, and Moran of the Christian Mobilizers is more active than ever.” This the first mention of Moran in BSC documents. The report mislabeled his organization but rightly placed Moran at the center of anti-British sentiment in Boston.

While in Boston, Agar began the process of organizing a pro-British Irish American group. He found the effort enormously challenging. It was possible to find Irish Americans supportive of the British war effort, but willingness to share those views in public was in short supply. Agar approached two prominent Boston Irish Catholics, “to head up the Committee”—that is, a proposed committee to push for Roosevelt’s pro-British policy. But while the two were “in sympathy with the Committee, they say they cannot step out in front.” If they did, “the Cardinal or his henchman Ahearn [*sic*], will attack them from the pulpit and the radio,” Agar wrote. He had learned from a local insider that Cardinal O’Connell believed nine in ten Boston Catholics opposed aid to Great Britain. “The worst of it is,” Agar concluded, “the Cardinal’s assertion is very nearly right.”<sup>20</sup>

The British sought Irish American personalities to rival the cardinal. In particular, agents thought the Democratic Party might avail a champion, so agents posed as party activists in order to woo men of consequence. One option was Al Smith, the Irish Catholic former governor of New York and 1928

Democratic presidential nominee, who had endorsed FDR at a key speech in Boston in 1932. But Smith “was reluctant to join any more committees” and worried that IADA, even if well intentioned, would be swallowed in controversy. He declined the invitation. Another candidate was Edward Burke, one of the first Irish Catholics to work at the prestigious Boston law firm of Hale and Dorr (now WilmerHale). Burke was appointed by FDR to the Volunteer Participation Committee of the Office of Civilian Defense and was an important figure in Massachusetts Democratic circles. But when he was invited to lead an organization calling itself the Irish American Defense Association, Burke responded coolly. He believed that “no special committee should be formed” in Boston and argued that public speeches and letters to the press would suffice. By October, a grim pattern had set in. “Several prominent Irish in Boston are working with us,” one BSC agent wrote to his superior. “They are not prepared, however, to come out in front in a formal committee.”<sup>21</sup>

Fall 1941 was a time of desperation for BSC and the British war effort generally. Britain’s military position was faltering, making American entry into the war critical. Barbarossa and its aftermath had been devastating, as the Germans made large gains on the Eastern Front and maintained air superiority. The British mainland was also suffering terribly under the Luftwaffe’s barrage. In a July speech reflecting on a recent trip to Britain, *New York Post* publisher George Backer observed, “In London, your eyes get accustomed to the destruction, with the heart of the City all gone.” Yet America remained stubbornly on the fence. The same day Backer gave his speech, Viscount Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to the United States, visited the Lockheed plant in Burbank, California, to thank workers there for supplying a hundred Hudson Bombers to Britain. On his way into the plant, the ambassador was met by picketers lofting placards reading “Wake Up America!—The British Are Here!” and “To Halifax with Halifax.”<sup>22</sup>

As the days wore on, even Churchill took up directly the challenge of installing a propaganda army in America. That a wartime prime minister staring into the jaws of defeat could devote any energy to such a project demonstrates its critical importance. On November 24 Churchill wrote to Anthony Eden, the former foreign secretary, inviting him to take over the Political Warfare Executive, SOE’s new black propaganda branch. “If you feel . . . that not only is the task of building up the ‘British Fifth Column’ all over the world important, but that S.O.E. is a good machine for constructing it, it would be a very

great help if you could arrange for some expression of your views,” Churchill implored. That the former foreign secretary was being asked to handle black propaganda speaks further to the conviction within British intelligence that America had to be turned, and that a seemingly homegrown public-opinion campaign was the key. Churchill hoped that, with Eden in charge, “we can really get the S.O.E. machine working as the instrument of policy that it ought to be.”<sup>23</sup>

In Boston the British tried to force the issue. A few days after Churchill’s letter to Eden, British agents set up IADA offices in the Little Building, at the corner of Boylston and Tremont streets. A Modern Gothic high-rise with a façade of Deer Isle granite and cast stone, the Little Building was perhaps the most fashionable Boston office building of the period. It commanded beautiful views of Boston Common and the Public Garden. But while IADA had a desirable office, there still was no one to fill it.

BSC blamed two forces above all for their difficulties recruiting in Boston. One, as we have seen, was the Catholic Church. Cardinal O’Connell would “crack down immediately” on anyone who stepped forward as “pronouncedly pro-British.” BSC realized that the Church was a principal reason that “the Irish in Massachusetts, both ‘lace curtain’ and ‘shanty,’ are better organized than anywhere else in the country,” and the same Church was not pushing its flock to change its attitude toward Britain’s war effort. The second obstacle was “the bigoted American Fascist Christian Mobilizer wing in New England . . . ably led by Francis Moran.” BSC was still getting the name of the group wrong, confusing it with that of Joe McWilliams’s New York–based Mobilizers. But after a few months of studying the Boston isolationist scene, they knew its leader and understood what he was capable of. “He provides the whole bag of tricks,” a BSC report noted, “rabble-rousing, race prejudice, and religious bigotry.” Agents also concluded that “he has some behind-the-door support from higher clergy.”

It was not just the Church that backed Moran. He seemed to be everywhere, from the heights of the clergy to the union halls. BSC thought “the most amenable Irish-Americans for aid to Britain are in the organized labor groups,” but Moran was getting in the way. Union organizers were “entirely willing to help along the program of our Committee,” yet rank-and-file members had other opinions. “In the labor unions, Coughlin’s *Social Justice* is widely sold around the union Halls,” operatives wrote, “this helps generate the following for Moran.”<sup>24</sup> There was great concern that, with Moran a thorn

in the side locally, national figures en route to Boston later in the year would compound the struggle. “Wheeler—Lindbergh [and] Nye are all coming here in December,” a secret reporter penned to London, referring to Senator Wheeler; Senator Gerald Nye, the influential North Dakota Republican; and Charles Lindbergh, the heroic aviator, anti-Semite, and America First Committee member who opposed the war and US aid to Britain.<sup>25</sup>

But fortunes can turn quickly. In late November, after months of failing to attract an elite leader from the ranks of politics or business to head IADA’s Boston branch, BSC struck paydirt. They had finally zeroed in on someone who possessed the intellect, motivation, and organizational skills to helm the Boston branch. Her name was Frances Sweeney.

### Marvelously Militant

“Frances Sweeney, a publicity agent . . . [who is] . . . marvelously militant for our cause has agreed to take on the job,” the BSC cutout wrote to London in November. She was “a stalwart” who “felt it was [her] patriotic duty to go to town on this to help the Irish themselves and the country as well.” The cutout described initiating talks with Sweeney in early fall 1941. It took some time to coax her into a leadership role, but when she was finally onboard, she proved an immediate boon. Almost from day one, fortunes began to turn in IADA’s favor, and at the street level—the very combat zone where Moran would need to be engaged.<sup>26</sup>

Characterizing Sweeney as an unsuspecting British operative in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act may be an unpopular position. Over the past twenty years, Sweeney was resurrected from obscurity and is now lauded for her anti-Fascist and civil rights activities during World War II. In 2001 historian, First Amendment defender, and public intellectual Nat Hentoff dedicated a new edition of his memoir *Boston Boy* to Sweeney. In her own time, many knew her as “Boston’s leader in the fight against intolerance.”<sup>27</sup>

We can feel confident in the sincerity of Sweeney’s views. “A Fascist is anyone who hates the common man,” Sweeney once told a friend. Her conviction was driven by faith. Anti-Fascists like Sweeney were a minority among American Catholics by 1939, but they were not extinct. Sweeney and other Catholic anti-Fascists, no less than the Christian Front, believed they were following authentic Catholic theological imperatives. One lodestar was Pope Pius XI’s encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931), which highlighted the “stato-

latry” of Fascism and Nazism and presented Fascism as opposed to Catholic Action. The Catholic left argued that obsessive anti-Communism elided the message of *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* and blinded Catholics to the injustices of Fascism and Nazism.<sup>28</sup>

Sweeney’s convictions were also driven by experience. She had grown up in an Irish Bostonian family that rejected the clannishness associated with that group. According to one source, her “earliest memory as a child was of her father single-handedly beating some Bostonians who were mauling and torturing a helpless Chinese person on a streetcar.” When she was born in 1907, her father James had just left his job as a bartender to take a technical job with the city, handling weights and measures. In this role, he was in contact with many in government service and politics, while maintaining connections to the working class. Frances’s mother also worked, as a bookkeeper. James Sweeney was consumed with politics of the proletarian sort.<sup>29</sup>

The Sweeneys were also, it is fair to say, one of the few Catholic families in 1930s Boston that read *New Masses*. A Marxist intellectual journal linked to the CPUSA, *New Masses* was decidedly unusual bedtime reading, perhaps especially for a young woman whom one friend described as “cheerful, bright, energetic, and as Irish as Paddy’s shillelagh.” Anti-Communism rose dramatically among Boston Irish Catholics in the 1920s, becoming a defining characteristic. But James regularly brought home copies and shared them with his children, and Frances read them, especially once she was in high school.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to reading, events pushed Frances Sweeney toward leftism and eventually Catholic anti-Fascism. Like Moran, Sweeney experienced a transformative job loss during the Great Depression. After graduating from Mount St. Joseph Academy in 1925, Sweeney started working at a Boston insurance company. She moved up from typist to stenographer and was placed in the brokerage department. It was on the brokerage floor where fortunes were made and lost. As a young woman, she was able to observe the raw emotion underlying the profit motive. Then, in 1937, she suddenly was without a job.<sup>31</sup>

This was no ordinary bout of unemployment. Sweeney had many older colleagues who paid the way for their families, breadwinners in an era when few women joined her mother in the workforce. She witnessed the terror of these freshly laid-off friends, the terror and the hardship. Sweeney went looking for work with someone who felt viscerally the injustice of finding oneself on capitalism’s cutting-room floor. In fall 1938 she discovered that Granville Hicks was hiring. The editor of *New Masses* and a famously public

CPUSA member since 1934, Hicks was looking for a secretary to assist him while he was a visiting professor at Harvard. Sweeney wanted the job, and she may have fudged a few details to get it. At one point she wrote, “I am 26 years old, college trained, and widely read. I may not be too bright by your standards, but I am eager to learn the kind of knowledge you have.” Sweeney was plenty bright, but she was also about thirty years old at the time, not twenty-six. It is also not clear that she was college-trained, although she may have been. But certainly she was, as she pointed out, “familiar with [Hicks’s] magazine articles and writings” and was “not afraid of hard work, nor of long hours.”

In another note, Sweeney described her tale of leftist epiphany. “We always had the *New Masses* around the house—but they never jolted me very much,” she wrote. Then, in high school, she “realized one day that they were nearer right in their thinking than what I was led to believe.” She told Hicks that when the forces of the Great Depression overwhelmed her brokerage house, the New Deal was not enough to rescue her or her coworkers. The system was rotten to the core. Even the massive intervention of the New Deal amounted to “do-nothing policies” in the face of the working person’s plight.

“I saw a man . . . die,” she wrote, “drop over me while he was dictating his last few letters on the job before his transfer.”

He was a man who married late in life because his economic standing would not allow it sooner. A man, who had five children because his church did not believe in birth control. There he was—a man who never earned enough to save—buffeted by two systems—religious and economic. He was just one of many white-collared workers who suffer from Insecurity, which breaks men’s spirits.

The trauma triggered a reaction in her own body. “I got choked up—couldn’t get my breath—and was taken to the hospital with heart trouble.” While recovering, Sweeney learned “that all the older men in my office with good paying positions had been dismissed.” She and her coworkers were victims of a kind of predation. “There was Insecurity reaching in after me again.”

Sweeney did not return to the brokerage after her hospital visit. Instead she took a moral stand in solidarity with fellow workers:

I wrote in and resigned my position—it was better doing that than being in a constant state of doubt. I told them that I would probably meet more intelligent people at the Five and Dime Store where I would perhaps

end up; that my soul was suffering from permanent shudders because of their tactics toward their employees. It was ghastly to think of those men who have lost their jobs at the age of 37 to 50 after years of work for one concern.

“I do hope that I am going to be bright enough to do your mail for you,” Sweeney added. She got the job.<sup>32</sup>

Hicks must have been mightily impressed, wary as he was of employing a Catholic. Hicks’s presence at Harvard had provoked high dudgeon among Catholics. Father Coughlin wrote that crimson, the school color, “took on new significance with the advent of the Red Hicks.” Coughlin made sure *Social Justice* readers knew that Hicks was the first confessed Communist to join the Harvard faculty. Sweeney’s personal connections also gave Hicks pause. Her uncle was Father J. Hugh O’Donnell, vice president of the University of Notre Dame and an energetic anti-Communist. But Sweeney showed that her faith meant something different than Coughlin’s. For Sweeney, Catholicism was a reason to pursue a more universal kind of justice. And Catholicism was a worldview open to criticism. Her observation that her colleague was “buffeted” not only by capitalism but also by the Catholic prohibition on contraception marked her as a radical within the Church community.<sup>33</sup>

Working for Hicks was a defining experience. Sweeney would forever be considered a Communist sympathizer connected to the CPUSA. But in her career as a writer and activist she was less a Communist than an anti-Fascist. There were also anti-Fascist influences in her life, such as Gaetano Salvemini, who, like Hicks, was visiting at Harvard in 1938, while Sweeney was there. Historian Stephen H. Norwood has called Salvemini “the leading Italian spokesperson for anti-Fascism in the United States during the 1930s.” Salvemini also had a reputation for inspiring women to take up the cause of international anti-Fascism. Sweeney read Salvemini voraciously and admired his thought.<sup>34</sup>

Salvemini had seen the perils of Fascism early on, when Mussolini forced him out of his position at the University of Florence in 1925. Unlike many anti-Fascists, he did not have to wait for 1935, when activists began following the banner of the Soviet Popular Front. Salvemini was a socialist but not a Stalinist, and he was an anti-Fascist first. Sweeney followed him in this re-

gard. He also vocally opposed the Catholic Church's compromises with Fascism. In his 1936 book *Under the Axe of Fascism*, he implied that *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pope Pius XI's landmark 1931 encyclical on labor, paved the way for Mussolini, blessing with holy water his integration of workers and corporations into the state. The key point for Sweeney was that Salvemini criticized the hierarchy—even the highest-ranking clerics. In Salvemini, she saw that one could resist Church doctrine and still be a faithful Catholic.<sup>35</sup>

Sweeney took that lesson into her work for IADA. Salvemini's ideas buttressed her faith even as she went on to contest the teachings of Coughlin and Ahern, not to mention the official line of Cardinal O'Connell. And she kept IADA going even when, its work barely begun, its purpose seemed to dissolve in a hail of Japanese bombs. The day after the assault on Pearl Harbor, the United States officially joined the war against Japan, meaning that war with Germany, Japan's ally, was soon to follow. The British no longer needed to fight the propaganda war in the United States. But Sweeney, who had no idea that she was working for the British, did not see matters this way. "I think it is a good time to lay the bases of groundwork now," she wrote to her cutout in the days after Pearl Harbor. Sweeney also was committed to the anti-Fascist cause at home, and she knew that Moran would not disappear simply because the United States had entered the war—he had already upset her event hours after Pearl Harbor. Material interest may have also played a role in Sweeney's tenacity: according to one source, she took the IADA job shortly after her father had died, to help the family make ends meet. The cutout forwarded Sweeney's message to BSC, which agreed that IADA should continue to fight Fascism in Boston, the Christian Front specifically.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, the front looked more popular than ever after the US entry into the war. Moran counted some of his biggest cash collections, and recorded some of his highest turnouts, after Pearl Harbor. On December 9 the American Jewish Committee's Henry Levy sent a report of the post-Pearl Harbor Christian Front meeting to the radio commentator Walter Winchell. Winchell was shocked to read that the front had just secured its "largest audience since the organization showed Nazi propaganda pictures," a reference to the *Sieg im Westen* screenings. Winchell shipped Levy's report to Clyde Tolson, the associate director of the FBI in Washington. Winchell, who commanded huge coast-to-coast audiences, would hammer away at Moran and the Christian Front over the airwaves for the next month.<sup>37</sup>

Moran had responded to Pearl Harbor with a complete lack of moderation, but it seemed that the more reckless his statements were, the more his audience appreciated him. On the morning of December 8, he composed a circular letter stating the front's "position on the war fearlessly and without equivocation." The letter opened with the kind of patriotic sentiments one might expect in the immediate aftermath of a national tragedy. "Our territory has been invaded and our fellow-citizens killed without warning," Moran wrote. "We shall do everything within our power to aid our country in every possible way." What came next, however, was red meat for the Christian Front's base. "We do not accept Mr. Roosevelt's statement that he was seeking peace," Moran continued. "Were it not for the unwarranted interference of Mr. Roosevelt in foreign affairs that were none of his business, and his refusal to grant the Orient the same right of self-determination that we ourselves have demanded in our Monroe Doctrine, the Japanese government would have had no incentive to attack us." As for Germany, Pearl Harbor had nothing to do with it. Moran vowed that while the Christian Front would not oppose the war against Japan, "it would not support war against Germany nor any American war of aggression."

Even as Moran suggested that war with Japan was justified now that the United States had been attacked, he argued that Roosevelt should be held responsible, morally and legally. "When the war is over we will demand an accounting," Moran insisted, before closing the letter with a textual shout in capital letters:

WHEN THIS WAR IS CONCLUDED, WE SHALL DO EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO FORCE THE IMPEACHMENT OF PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS [AND] DEMAND THEIR TRIAL UNDER CONSTITUTIONAL LAW ON CRIMINAL CHARGES. MAY GOD GRANT US STRENGTH AND VICTORY IN BOTH FIGHTS FOR AMERICAN FREEDOM AND JUSTICE!<sup>38</sup>

That evening, Moran read the same statement at a meeting of the Christian Front, receiving a standing ovation from an overflowing crowd. When "the plate was passed," \$75 (\$1,320.00 in 2020 dollars) came back, one of the front's largest collections ever. With his audience traumatized by the Pearl Harbor attack, Moran invoked religion, but not as a comfort. "Moran particularly condemned the US government for declaring war on the Feast of the

Immaculate Conception,” an FBI informant reported. The feast, which is dedicated to the Queen of Peace, is celebrated annually on December 8.<sup>39</sup>

Three days later, December 11, Hitler declared war on the United States, after which Congress replied with a unanimous declaration of war against Germany. Moran’s response was that “President Roosevelt is guilty of murder.” He told the *New York Post* as much for its December 26 story “US Fascists Keep Up Work Unhindered.” Moran reluctantly agreed that Congress was within its rights, given Hitler’s declaration. “We must support our government in what now becomes a justified war,” he lamented in a postcard to a correspondent. But he continued to press the case that America’s war with Germany was a product of Jewish and British fifth columnists. He warned of “an internal enemy far more treacherous and dangerous than the external one,” concluding, “we congratulate our Jewish and pro-British warmongers. Presumably they are happy. We are not.”<sup>40</sup>

Sweeney raced to counter Moran, bringing to her project an energy at least equal to his own. “We have about ten girls who are magnificent workers, and a Roll Call list of about 400,” she wrote in a December 10 letter to one of her supporters, the influential Harvard philosopher and public intellectual Ralph Barton Perry. The membership list reflected the extraordinarily fast development of an organization whose local incarnation was born less than a month earlier. Among the members were Boston power players. These included a number of Irish leaders, such as P. A. O’Donnell, whose department store, E. T. Slattery, was perhaps the most high-end in the city. Another major recruit was surgeon Frank Lahey, founder of the world-renowned Lahey Clinic. Bernard Rothwell, owner of Bay State Milling and “a man of considerable wealth,” became IADA’s honorary chair.

Rothwell “was frightened by our clerics’ reaction to Mr. Roosevelt,” Sweeney wrote in her letter to Perry. Sweeney, too, recognized that faith was a battlefield in Boston. She knew that Moran used his stage at Hibernian Hall as if it were a sanctuary; if IADA was to compete with the Christian Front, it would have to do so as a limb of the Mystical Body. That meant Sweeney needed not only professors and doctors and business leaders on her side, but also a Roman Catholic priest.<sup>41</sup>

Her target was Father John Louis Bonn, a Jesuit and a professor at Boston College. A masterful preacher, respected scholar, author, and teacher, Bonn founded the college’s theater department. Through his summer acting workshops, he encountered many Jewish Bostonians. The workshop “was a landmark

in my life, a milestone, a crucial point,” Leonard Nimoy said of Bonn’s program. “It gave my life a direction.” Nimoy, of stage and *Star Trek* fame, grew up in Boston’s West End, the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The workshops constituted a landmark in Bonn’s life as well. His perspective was not that of an academic priest sealed in a Catholic milieu. As a priest working outside the Catholic community, he was open to the Jewish people around him and to a theology that acknowledged the place of Jews in society.<sup>42</sup>

In October 1941 Bonn made headlines when, at a Sunday morning Communion breakfast, he “denounced racial hatred against Jews.” Bonn unleashed a blistering attack on prejudiced Catholics. “Christ was a Jew, the Twelve Apostles were Jews, and the Virgin Mary was a Jew,” he noted. “As followers of Christ, we cannot persecute the Jews.” To do so was a violation of the Church itself, he argued. “Those who take part in speaking against the Jews are taking part in persecution of the church, and you are the church.” Boston’s Coughlinites hit back immediately. One correspondent wrote to Bonn, “I have worked for them”—Jews, that is—“and dealed [*sic*] with them and any priest that strikes up for the Jews should go work like a slave and then you would know what you are talking about.” Another asked sarcastically, “Was God the Father a Jew?”<sup>43</sup>

Bonn’s theology and forthright talk stunned Sweeney, and as soon as she was on board with IADA, she tried to recruit him. Sweeney’s original letter of outreach is nowhere to be found, and the same is true of Bonn’s reply. But the cutout made a copy of the reply and placed it in the SOE’s secret files. From the copy, we can glean that Sweeney revealed to Bonn her plans to get the Christian Front shut down. What Sweeney did not know was that Bonn was already suspicious of IADA. He replied that, before Sweeney was installed in the organization, he had been approached twice informally about joining. He then asked Sweeney to forgive his “bluntness”:

I regret very much that it is impossible for me to lend my name to the Irish-American Defense Association much less ally myself with any group organized to suppress freedom of speech and of the press in America. Perhaps I misunderstand the aims of your organization . . . I feel Father Coughlin is quite wrong at the moment. I know that anti-Semitism is sinful. I am deeply opposed to Mr. Moran and all his works, yet I would defend to my life his American right to speak and to publish, nor shall I ever join a group that would deprive any man or any

group of that right. Furthermore, I shall attack such un-American attitudes with as great vigor as I attack anti-Semitism.<sup>44</sup>

Sweeney was disconsolate. On her own, she had stumbled upon the Tillich question: How to stop a Christian Front whose support for Fascism and anti-Semitism was a product of interpretations of doctrine licensed by a clerical officer class? Only an ordained Catholic could provide an effective countervailing argument to Moran's prostitution of the Roman Catholic religion, and now her best potential spokesman had turned her down. Evidently Sweeney thought Bonn had mistaken her intentions. "It grieves me to put it so bluntly that our clerics are fallible," she wrote to Perry, the Harvard professor. "They often have inadequate information" and "they possess prejudices which they do not overcome." Turned down by Father Bonn, Sweeney decided to take the situation into her own hands. "This battle must be fought by liberal Catholics themselves," she wrote. She would abandon her effort to establish an institutional face for IADA. The struggle against Moran's Fascist and anti-Semitic movement was, as even Bonn agreed, a religious imperative. But it would be one for the laity to accomplish.<sup>45</sup>

### Exposing Moran

In 1963 former CIA director Allen Dulles gave a speech outlining the qualities of a good spy. Inquisitiveness, perceptiveness about people, ability to work under difficult conditions, attention to detail, and skill in expressing ideas not only clearly but interestingly—these were his top qualifications. In the fall of 1941, a younger Dulles moved into an office in Rockefeller Center, one floor above BSC, to take a job running the New York office of the Coordinator of Information. Dulles didn't know it, but his perfect spy was working for the British agents downstairs. Neither, of course, did the spy herself.<sup>46</sup>

Sweeney was inconspicuous and well connected. She knew her community, from the back streets to the newsroom floors and the halls of power. It was her skill and strategy that won BSC its greatest success in Boston. Sweeney's plan was to use the press to expose Moran's pro-Nazi propaganda activities and thereby put pressure on faith and civic leaders to take a stand against him. Such designs were perfect for BSC. Sweeney aimed, essentially, to distance herself from events by making the papers her go-between. She would plant the story, while her own operation would stay under the radar of the

FBI and Massachusetts officials. To carry out such a scheme required knowledge of local politics and media and access to the discrete assistance of trusting partners. Sweeney coordinated all the pieces.

One of those pieces was the *Herald-Traveler*. “As for affairs here in Boston,” Sweeney wrote in the days after Pearl Harbor, “we seem to have been adopted by the *Boston Herald-Traveler*.” This was just the kind of hometown champion that served Sweeney and BSC best. It was the same paper that had written up Hitler in spring 1940, provoking Herbert Scholz’s ire. But the *Herald-Traveler* had also “been extremely anti-Roosevelt on his domestic policies,” Sweeney explained, and had expressed pro-Coughlin views. These past positions were excellent camouflage. The *Herald-Traveler* could go after Moran and the Christian Front from the perspective of fellow FDR critics. No one could claim that the paper’s criticisms of Moran reflected mere partisan feuding or the same-old opinions, easily ignored. Instead, those criticisms would stand out as principled, which they were.<sup>47</sup>

Sweeney arranged to take advantage of the *Herald-Traveler*’s support when the economist Leo Cherne came to speak in Boston. Cherne was a pro-business New Dealer close to FDR. An animated speaker, Cherne was scheduled to address the Advertising Club of Boston on December 16. Sweeney arranged a luncheon after the speech at Boston’s Hotel Statler, and William G. Gavin, the publisher of the *Herald-Traveler*, agreed to attend with Boston Mayor Maurice Tobin as his guest. Sweeney persuaded Cherne to make some light remarks at the luncheon on “morale” and to discuss the Christian Front threat. Thanks to Sweeney’s deft orchestration, the mayor would hear all about the Christian Front.<sup>48</sup>

The press would too, hopefully. Sweeney used her associates to get other newsmen in the room at the Statler, in addition to Gavin. She asked Professor Perry to call his contacts in the media and persuade them to attend the Cherne event. “They will never suspect that we are going to reach behind you to eventually snap them in so we can do this Coughlinite job from within,” she told Perry. Her objective was not to snap the press into line but to snap Moran’s organization in two.<sup>49</sup>

After Cherne’s talk, Sweeney’s machinations moved into high gear. “Tonight or tomorrow,” she told IADA members, like a general addressing their troops before battle, “the paper will ‘expose Francis P. Moran’ for selling Flanders Hall books of that vile Nazi agent, George Sylvester Viereck.” Sweeney developed a range of publicity operations to brighten the media spotlight on

Moran. “We have a magnificent letter from Governor Saltonstall commending and urging Boston newspapers to expose all . . . who preach racial and religious intolerance.” There would be another letter “from the Administrator of the Committee of Public Safety for the State urging the same thing.” Sweeney also planned to petition “our Irish Catholic Mayor Tobin” for a likeminded letter.

The IADA members themselves would be tasked with holding Moran’s feet to the fire in person, producing a good story for the *Herald-Traveler*. The plan was for “a group of young Liberals” to infiltrate the upcoming January 5 Christian Front meeting and “try to pin Moran down into telling his Jew program during the question period.”

Then the paper will throw up its hands in horror at his answers; and our “Republican” publisher will rush with his Republican governor’s letter to our great Republican Cardinal [O’Connell] and assume that he will want to do something about such terrible, un-Christian actions. That way . . . we figure that we might be able to shame him [O’Connell] into urging our clergy to urge people to stop buying the books and to stay away from the meetings.

Sweeney had gamed out all the steps, figuring how to get even the cardinal to condemn Moran. She also thought that a story on Moran’s anti-Semitism and Nazi propaganda would motivate the state’s federal politicians. “The Congressmen around here are only all too glad to play along with the paper, as they have been severely harassed by this group,” Sweeney assured. For added measure, she arranged for Rothwell, the businessman and IADA honorary chair, to release a statement to the press comparing the Christian Front to the Nazis and insinuating similarities between Moran and Hitler.<sup>50</sup>

On January 2, 1942, the *Herald-Traveler* ran a front-page story on the Viereck books. Readers learned that Moran and the Christian Front had not only been selling Nazi propaganda published by an unlicensed foreign agent before the declaration of war but were continuing to do so even after the United States and the Nazis commenced formal hostilities. Speaking to the *Herald-Traveler*, Richard Cunningham, the commander of the American Legion in Massachusetts, described the sales as “outrageous” and “demanded vigorously that . . . sales be stopped without delay.” Cunningham provided the key quote, encapsulating the perspective that Sweeney and BSC hoped would penetrate boundaries of partisanship, ideology, and religion. “Sales of propaganda books of an enemy seeking to destroy us is not only disloyal,”

Cunningham said, “but indefensible from any American point of view.” The story provided some of the worst publicity Moran had ever received, and at an especially fragile moment. The Christian Front had been thriving in the wake of the war declarations, but such popularity was obviously precarious—it could wash away any time in a wave of patriotic condemnation. Later that day, when asked by a friend how he was doing, Moran responded, “I’m being persecuted by the Jews.”<sup>51</sup>

Boston would have the weekend of January 2–4 to digest the report that Moran and the Christian Front were knowingly distributing enemy propaganda. Meanwhile, Sweeney was preparing her “group of young Liberals” to attend the Monday meeting where they would demand that Moran answer to the charges in the papers. Everything was coming together perfectly. The press would be paying close attention on January 5, keeping the story going and Moran on his heels. Civic leaders would be unable to turn a blind eye; Governor Saltonstall was on the record condemning the very acts the papers were exposing, and Mayor Tobin had already been warned about the Christian Front at the December 17 luncheon. He would feel immense pressure to come out forcefully, assuming Sweeney’s compatriots managed to provoke Moran into saying something untoward. All that remained was to see the plan through.

But the IADA members never got the chance to play their part in Sweeney’s strategy. When the night of January 5 arrived, it was not young liberals who took down Moran, it was the Boston Police. “Acting on a tip that various student groups and ‘patriotic organizations’ planned to ‘start something’ at the Christian Front meeting,” more than twenty police officers took stations about the hall to discourage an outbreak,” the *Herald-Traveler* reported. But the police were not just there for crowd control. Officers mounted the stage at Hibernian Hall as Moran brought out some of the Viereck books, then confiscated the books. According to the *Herald*, the morning sister paper of the *Herald-Traveler*, “The seizure followed issuance of an order from Police Commissioner Joseph Timilty instructing the department to confiscate all such publications wherever found on sale or offered free.” Viereck’s books were “banned in Boston,” via a general order from Timilty “read at the noon roll call to all police officers.” When Moran protested that the officers had “exceeded their authority,” they repeated to him Timilty’s order. That same evening, Moran placed a phone call to Timilty, who told the Christian Front

boss “that his activities were un-American in time of war and that if he defied the general order he would be arrested promptly.”<sup>52</sup>

Evidence suggests that Moran kept his cool as the seizure was underway. After hauling away the books, two officers of the Police Radical Squad returned to the stage at Hibernian and gave Moran a receipt for his property. “Keep the books and read them,” he wisecracked. “You may learn something.”<sup>53</sup> Members of the crowd wanted to know the officers’ names. A plant at the meeting from the Jewish Community Relations Council wrote that Moran “said they were Benjamin Goodman and William Goldston,” which “evoked considerable shouting and booing.” There was no booing from British intelligence. Someone, presumably the cutout or another BSC operative, snipped the book-seizure story from one of the many papers covering it, pasted it to a sheet of stationery reading “Boston Chapter Irish American Defense Association,” and mailed it to SOE headquarters in London. The British intelligence archive positively bulges with such clippings, a signal of the importance BSC assigned to the book seizure.<sup>54</sup>

It is impossible to say with certainty whether Sweeney directly sought police involvement or else Commissioner Timilty acted on his own. One source from the period, a draft of an exposé of Moran and the Christian Front, suggests that Sweeney leaned on the commissioner. Donald Grant, a graduate student at Harvard, wrote that “an investigation of Moran was begun at the instigation of a group of Boston Catholics of Irish descent—members of the American Irish Defense Association. It was carried out by an Irish Catholic—Boston Police Commissioner Joseph F. Timilty.” It is not entirely clear whether Grant was claiming that IADA had tipped off the police, or whether he was suggesting that IADA had instead fostered a circumstance to which the police felt obliged to respond. Certainly he was struck by the unlikelihood of it all, given the tightness of the Boston Irish community. In any case, these lines appear only in the draft, which is archived by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. The published story, which appeared in the *Nation* on March 15, 1942, omits any suggestion of a causal relationship between IADA and the police crackdown.<sup>55</sup>

Another writer who connected IADA to the police action was Isabel Currier, a liberal Catholic, novelist, and friend of Sweeney’s. Writing in *Commonweal* in 1944, Currier offered that Sweeney’s “public service was to interest the Boston *Herald-Traveler* in launching a newspaper crusade against the

Christian Front—within three days, the Boston Police Commissioner had demanded that Francis P. Moran disband his organization.” Elsewhere Currier wrote that the disclosure of Moran’s propaganda activities “forced Commissioner Timilty to order the Front to disband.” Like Grant’s draft, Currier’s published writings leave the Sweeney-Timilty relationship ambiguous. There is no doubt that the exposure Sweeney engineered influenced police action, but the question remains whether Sweeney tipped off the police to the distribution of contraband at the meeting. If she did, then Father Bonn was right to fear that IADA, no matter how laudable its goals, was abetting censorship.<sup>56</sup>

While British intelligence and liberal Catholics were gleeful over the book confiscations, the FBI and the Massachusetts attorney general’s office were both blindsided by Timilty’s move. The FBI had been pursuing its own investigation in light of Levy’s report, which had been forwarded to the bureau by Walter Winchell. Special Agent J. W. Coulter interviewed Levy, who explained that he was “hoping . . . to bring pressure to bear to have Moran taken into protective custody during the present emergency.” The idea of custodial detention was to keep investigative targets under wraps while compiling evidence, and after Pearl Harbor, the FBI and other federal law enforcers were empowered to take in a range of possible suspects without charges. The specific authority came under the Alien Enemy Control Program, which was put in place by presidential proclamation. This program would become the basis for Japanese American internment after Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. Levy’s position was that because of Moran’s anti-Semitism, he should not be “left at large,” while America was at war. But Peterson disagreed. “Levy was advised,” Peterson wrote to Hoover on January 2, “that Moran is a citizen of the United States and as such still is entitled to the right of free speech as long as that does not violate any of the existing statutes concerning national defense.” Peterson, who was legally and constitutionally correct, must have been appalled by the book seizure. But Hoover may have been more sympathetic and at least was not deterred by the unexpected moves of the BPD. Within two weeks of receiving Peterson’s letter, Hoover opened a custodial detention investigation into Moran under the auspices of the Alien Enemy Control Program.<sup>57</sup>

As for state officials, Massachusetts Attorney General Robert Bushnell was incensed by Timilty’s raid. Bushnell was a long-time prosecutor with a penchant for rooting out financial corruption in state government. He was also no stranger to police raids. Known as a “racket-buster,” he had ordered nu-

merous such raids on gambling syndicates.<sup>58</sup> But in those cases, police were breaking up illegal activity. What laws had Moran and the Christian Front broken? Bushnell had an investigator, Dennis McCadden, look into that question, and he came back with a sobering report. “To my knowledge,” McCadden wrote to Bushnell, “there is no state statute under which Moran can be prosecuted for anything that he said or did . . . nor can he be prosecuted for the sale of the Flanders Hall books.” McCadden’s opinion was that Timilty was eager “to win for himself nationwide publicity in curbing a person who had been publicized by Mr. Walter Winchell as being inimical to the welfare of the country.”<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Timilty seemed more interested in giving out quotes than assuring due process or establishing proper grounds for investigation and prosecution. Quizzed by reporters about his authority to seize the books, Timilty unloaded with patriotic pronouncements. “Un-American acts,” Timilty warned, “would not be tolerated by this department—the distribution of such enemy propaganda is plainly an act of disloyalty.” But was it illegal? “America is at war,” Timilty thundered.<sup>60</sup>

To the extent that Timilty believed he had specific legal authority, he was relying on the Viereck indictment. But this was itself problematic, for multiple reasons. For one thing, it was not the job of the Boston Police to enforce federal laws. As McCadden put it, Timilty “did not have any evidence,” either at the time of the raid or subsequently “to substantiate a violation of any state law or statute.” For another, at the time of the raid, Viereck only had been charged. His federal trial was not scheduled to start for another month. In other words, no determination had yet been made as to the legality of Viereck’s actions or the status of his pamphlets as contraband. It seemed to Bushnell that, because no ruling had yet established that Moran’s books were forbidden, the police were obligated to leave him be. Until a judge stated otherwise, his book sales were protected by the First Amendment.<sup>61</sup>

In the press, Bushnell “announced he would back the Police Commissioner ‘to the limit.’” But in fact the attorney general was enraged. He sounded off during a visit with Peterson at the FBI’s Boston office. Bushnell was of the “opinion that Timilty had acted precipitously . . . and that the Police Department did not unearth any evidence that would sustain the complaint against Moran for violation of any state law.” Worse still, Bushnell told Peterson, “The source of information is [now] closed.” No doubt this was upsetting to Peterson as well. Hoover had been riding him for months to figure out a way

to shut Moran down. But now Moran could be expected to clam up. “Utterances or acts of a seditious nature . . . have been ended by the action of the police,” Bushnell lamented.<sup>62</sup>

Both Bushnell and Timilty saw the situation clearly. Bushnell had ample reason to believe Moran would never be successfully prosecuted for distributing Viereck’s books. And Timilty understood correctly that the raid would make him a hero. In April *Life* magazine ran a ten-page full-photo feature praising Timilty for the “virtual disappearance” of the Christian Front in Boston. “Following complaints from the Irish-American Defense Association, . . . Boston Police . . . descended on Moran’s headquarters,” the piece read. “What Boston did to abate the nuisance of Moran can be done by any other city in the land,” *Life* stressed, oblivious to the unusual factors at play, including Sweeney’s genius-level publicity campaign and BSC’s bankrolling of IADA. Timilty was so chuffed that he wrote a letter to the editor of *Life* thanking the magazine. Had he been more gracious, he would have deferred to Sweeney, but instead he took full credit for “the cessation of the activities and meetings of the so-called Christian Front in this city.”<sup>63</sup>

The celebration was premature. The police had taken the Christian Front down, but they had not knocked Moran out. His next opportunity would come thanks to Commissioner Timilty, the very man gloating over Moran’s ruin.