

*A Time
of Trial:
New Yorkers
During
the Great
Depression
and World
War II*

The Great Depression had a significant impact upon immigration and upon ethnic and non-white New Yorkers. With so many people out of work during the early 1930s, few Europeans looked to America as the land of golden opportunity. After 1935 the spread of fascism made many Europeans desperate to seek a haven despite economic conditions in the city, but America's restrictive immigration policies were tightly enforced. As a result only approximately 100,000 immigrants settled in New York during the 1930s. Nor did many Puerto Ricans journey to the depression-ridden city. American blacks continued to migrate north but only because conditions for them were so appalling in the rural South. Caribbean immigration virtually stopped during the

1930s, and some West Indian New Yorkers returned to their home islands.

Among the Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution who succeeded in gaining entry visas to the United States were distinguished artists, musicians, scholars, and intellectuals. The New School for Social Research, originally founded as a university for adult education, responded by creating "a university for exiles." Under the leadership of Alvin Johnson, the New School hired dozens of refugee scholars, chiefly Germans, and helped find places for others.¹ Most of these immigrant intellectuals did not associate with New York's ethnic communities, but some Jews among them did. Of the German-Jewish refugees who did escape to America from 1938 to 1940, several thousand settled in the Washington Heights area of upper Manhattan where they maintained a distinct community of exiles into the 1960s. Mostly middle or upper class, in the professional, business, or white collar occupations, their adjustment to New York was not easy, and some professionals had to change careers to survive. They published their own newspaper, *Aufbau*, and organized several German-Jewish social and cultural groups. In contrast to the nineteenth century German-Jewish immigrants, many of these newcomers were Orthodox.²

Henry Kissinger, future secretary of state, was one of those German-Jewish refugees. His father found little demand in depression New York for his occupation as a teacher. After sporadic work for two years, he got "a low-paying job as a bookkeeper at a factory owned by friends from Germany." Fortunately, Kissinger's mother was able to gain employment and help support the family.³ Like other Orthodox German families, the Kissingers belonged to Congregation K'hal Adath Jeshurun, whose rabbi had headed the yeshiva in Frankfurt.⁴

The Great Depression battered nearly all New Yorkers, especially in the early years. Lines of unemployed men and women patiently waited for handouts at soup kitchens, while nearby stood apple sellers. In Central and Riverside parks and vacant city lots the unemployed and homeless lived in pockets of shacks called "Hoovervilles." One historian reported that on a single day in January 1931, 85,000 people "waited for free meals at eighty-one locations in front of churches, the Salvation Army, and other charitable institutions."⁵ In 1930 the Municipal Lodging House in the city provided more than 400,000 lodgings and one million meals for homeless men and women, and the next year

both figures doubled.⁶ About one fourth of New York's workers were unemployed by 1933.

The economic collapse affected some workers more than others. Manufacturing and mechanical industries were especially devastated. By 1934 more than one third of workers in those occupations were on relief. The building industry was also hard hit. The construction of offices, homes, and apartments was curtailed, and the middle class dreams of many New Yorkers were put on hold. Despite depression-era projects connecting the city and the suburbs (the George Washington Bridge in 1931, the Lincoln Tunnel in 1937), the rate of suburban growth declined from the pace of the 1920s. The completion of the Triborough Bridge in 1936 and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel in 1940 augured increased development of the outer boroughs, but many Manhattan residents simply could not afford to move, and here too the rate of growth declined.

Unskilled laborers in manufacturing and construction, mainly Italians, Poles, and to a lesser extent Irish, Germans, and Jews, suffered more than all but blacks. In lower Manhattan's Little Italy, 16.5 percent of the families had no adult wage earner in 1930. Two years later the figure was 47.6 percent.⁷ Uptown, Robert Orsi noted, "The residents of Italian Harlem did not need outside researchers and statisticians to inform them about the plight of their community. They could see Italian Harlem crumbling around them; they inhabited its primitive housing and walked its dangerous streets." He quoted one social worker as saying, "Evictions were going on right and left. Landlords not being able to collect their rent were putting people on the streets."⁸

New York's Jewish industrial workers experienced similar difficulties. The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies concluded after a study conducted in 1930 that "the normal absorption of Jews within the American economic structure is now practically impossible."⁹ Alfred Kazin, who grew up in Brownsville during the 1930s, recalled, "From the early 'thirties on, my father [a painter] could never be sure in advance of a week's work. . . . It puzzled me greatly when I came to read in books that Jews are a shrewd people particularly given to commerce and banking, for all the Jews I knew had managed to be an exception to the rule." He concluded, "I grew up with the belief that the natural condition of a Jew was to be a propertyless worker like my painter father and my dressmaker mother and my dressmaker uncles and

cousins in Brownsville—workers, kin to all the workers of the world, dependent entirely on the work of their hand. All happiness in our house was measured by the length of a job."¹⁰

Deteriorating social and economic conditions in the city's black ghettos took a further tumble during the Great Depression. Exact figures do not exist for unemployment and income in the 1920s for precise comparisons, but black New Yorkers suffered more than whites during the 1930s. Median black income in Harlem fell 44 percent between 1929 and 1933; and in the bottom years of the depression more than 40 percent of blacks were out of work, nearly twice the proportion of whites.¹¹

The city's economy remained about as closed to blacks as it had been for the three previous decades. Construction crews hired only a few blacks, and those employed on the subways served as porters, not as higher paid motorman. Department stores and other large employers of white collar workers generally refused to hire black workers. Some—but by no means all—of Harlem's larger stores made token gestures by taking on a few black clerks in the 1920s. In 1934 L. M. Blumstein, owner of a large department store on 125th Street, noted that he gave a donation to the National Urban League and had hired a few blacks as porters, maids, and elevator operators in the previous five years. Blumstein admitted that 75 percent of his customers were black, but he did not see the need to employ black sales clerks.¹²

Among the most demeaning jobs open to black New Yorkers were the "slave markets," found on certain blocks of the Bronx, where unemployed black women congregated on street corners, carrying signs advertising themselves as available for house work. Housewives went from woman to woman, "shopping" for the lowest priced workers. A state committee reported it was "not surprising that householders find it very easy to secure day-work help for 15 and 20 cents an hour."¹³

Given the deplorable depression conditions, it is easily understood why more than 40 percent of black families in 1933 were on relief. Public support funds were woefully inadequate, paying only \$2.39 per week in 1932, and many individuals who were out of work were unable to receive any help at all.¹⁴ Inevitably housing and health conditions for blacks deteriorated further during the 1930s, while rents remained higher in Harlem than elsewhere. Modest slum clearance and public housing projects inaugurated under the New Deal late in

the 1930s had minimal impact upon either Harlem or Bedford-Stuyvesant.¹⁵

Rising relief rolls were a sign of hard times, but they alone do not tell the extent of suffering. New York Chinese experienced an estimated unemployment rate of 30 percent in the early depression as dropping incomes adversely affected their hand laundries and restaurants, the mainstays of the city's Chinese population. Scholar Peter Kwong noted that the Federal Emergency Relief Administration reported only 1.2 percent of the Chinese population was on relief compared to 23.9 of blacks and 9.2 of whites. "Many Chinese held to traditional concepts of pride and would not lose face by admitting they needed help," he tells us. To make ends meet they turned to job sharing and aid from their tongs and loan associations.¹⁶

Until World War II ended the depression, one's status as a white collar worker or city employee did not render one exempt from economic woes.¹⁷ One white collar worker reportedly told persons handing out food in a soup kitchen, "I wouldn't do this, but if I eat here it makes what little there is at home last longer for my wife while I am walking the streets."¹⁸ Yet white collar workers on the whole did get by better than blue collar ones, which meant that Jewish New Yorkers "because of their overall white-collar occupational profiles . . . fared better during the Depression than many other groups."¹⁹ Among Italians who were white collar workers conditions were also better than among the less skilled; a depression era survey in Italian East Harlem revealed that the overwhelming majority of parents thought that office work was the most desirable employment for their children.²⁰

Facing limited job prospects for their children and realizing that white collar work offered a likely path to economic stability and mobility, many New Yorkers kept their children in school for more years. The number of students attending high school increased 45 percent between 1930 and 1935.²¹ While Italians and others increasingly stayed in school longer, Jews continued to lead in seeking educational opportunities. High school enrollment became the norm for both Jewish men and women. Although the Jewish men were more apt to attend college than Jewish women, Jewish women were more likely to avail themselves of higher education than females from other ethnic groups. In 1934 Jewish women represented more than one half of female students attending New York's public colleges.²²

Besides keeping their children in school, families coped in other ways. Young couples postponed marriages, or if they did tie the knot, they moved in with their parents until they could earn enough to afford their own housing. Couples also had fewer children during the Great Depression.²³

Unemployed New Yorkers, blue and white collar, turned to traditional sources of aid; and Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish religious agencies and charities all expanded their activities in response to the emergency. Jewish philanthropies reported a 40 percent increase in requests for assistance in the first six months of 1931 alone. Contributions were up in the early years of the depression, but Jewish charities still could not keep up with the demand. The rapid synagogue-building of the 1920s came to an abrupt halt, and many congregations struggled to maintain services for their members. Yeshiva University nearly closed, and some old-age homes, nurseries, and orphanages actually shut their doors.²⁴

During the 1920s Archbishop Patrick Cardinal Hayes coordinated Catholic welfare efforts through Catholic Charities, whose annual parish appeals soon grossed one million dollars. In the 1930s, however, Catholic Charities soon found itself unable to meet all requests for aid. By the time Francis Cardinal Spellman assumed the leadership of the Diocese of New York in 1939, it had a \$28 million debt.²⁵

Harlem's churches also reached out to the unemployed residents. They had traditionally helped the poor, and with poverty on the rise they expanded their efforts.²⁶ The largest and most prestigious church, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s Abyssinian Baptist, provided food, clothing, coal, and kerosene to those in need. A cooperative effort of Harlem churches, led by the Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop of St. Philips Protestant Episcopal Church, also gave away food, clothing, and carfare and searched for jobs for the unemployed.²⁷

The most colorful figure in depression Harlem was George Baker, known as Father Divine. Claiming to be God, he attracted many followers, both white and black, and raised funds to run fifteen "heavens" in Harlem, which served daily banquets for all visitors. Whether or not all participants really believed Father Divine was God is not known, but allegedly 3,000 persons a day willingly accepted his meals.²⁸

Welfare associations like the Charity Organization Society, the Children's Aid Society, the Urban League, and the New York Association for

Improving the Condition of the Poor all expanded their efforts to meet depression needs. In the end, however, private charities were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis. New Yorkers, as did Americans elsewhere, turned to government, first to municipal and state agencies and eventually to Washington. By 1934 between 70 and 90 percent of Jews on relief received aid from public funds rather than from Jewish welfare agencies.²⁹

In attempting to respond to demands for financial assistance, New York City's government was overwhelmed. The city could not balance its budget without curtailing municipal services and laying off employees. A desperate Mayor Jimmy Walker dismissed several thousand school teachers in 1930–1931, and more city cutbacks followed.³⁰ Social workers reported that they "saw much more distress last winter [1930–1931] than they had ever seen before."³¹ Even though municipal funds were increasingly limited, New Yorkers nonetheless recognized that government continued to represent a source of possible employment. Sociologist Roger Waldinger noted:

In 1933, under Tammany, 6,327 individuals applied for government jobs; six years later, 250,000 job seekers knocked at the municipal service's door. Openings in just one city agency, the newly competitive welfare department, attracted 100,000 testakers in 1939. The search for upward mobility through civil service also accelerated, as applications for promotional exams climbed from 6,270 in 1935 to 26,847 in 1939.³²

Yet it was not relief or jobs alone that caused New Yorkers to focus on the municipal government. In the face of economic hardship, the all too traditional graft and poor quality of municipal services became more glaring and, for many, unacceptable. As stories surfaced and rumors circulated about corruption in city government, including the office of the mayor, Governor Franklin Roosevelt appointed a commission headed by Judge Samuel Seabury to investigate. Seabury's investigations in 1930 revealed payoffs to the police, clerks, and bondsmen. Then the commission turned to magistrates and labor racketeering. Among a growing list of public officials taking graft, the investigators uncovered the county registrar of Brooklyn, the Hon. James A. McQuade, who had managed to accumulate more than \$500,000 in five years on an annual salary of \$12,000. He claimed he had friends who loaned him

large sums. When asked if he could remember who loaned him hundreds of thousands of dollars, he replied, "Oh Judge, offhand I could not."³³ As the trail of corruption pointed to City Hall, Jimmy Walker was faced with possible prosecution. His charm no longer adequate to the task, Walker resigned in 1932 and sailed off to Europe with his new wife.³⁴

The stage was set for Fiorello La Guardia, considered by many to have been New York's most outstanding mayor. When Walker quit, Joseph V. McKee, an Irish Tammany man and President of the Board of Aldermen, became acting mayor until the election of 1933. In that year's campaign, drawing upon discontented voters, La Guardia ran as a Republican-fusion candidate supported by good government clubs. The "Little Flower," as La Guardia was called, won by only a plurality of the votes.³⁵ However, in winning reelection in 1937 and 1941, La Guardia accomplished an extraordinary feat for a fusion reform candidate.

The feisty mayor was perfect for New York's polyglot population. His father was an Italian Protestant and his mother Jewish; he was Episcopalian. The mayor had learned about nation's immigrant heritage while working in Fiume with emigrants who wanted to come to America, by serving as an interpreter at Ellis Island, and later by representing East Harlem in Congress. He spoke Yiddish, Italian, German, Croatian and two other foreign languages that he used when campaigning. Once, when charged with being anti-Semitic, he issued a challenge to his accuser to debate the campaign's issues; the debate was to be "ENTIRELY IN THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE."³⁶ The new mayor could not, and did not, appease all groups. In 1933 Italians overwhelmingly supported him. Jews also favored La Guardia, though not as strongly as Italians. Jews became increasingly more supportive of the mayor as he raised the number of city positions available through civil service, appointed a number of Jews and Italians to high municipal jobs, and when he chose as running mates for the president of the board of alderman and comptroller a Jew and Irishman respectively.³⁷ Jewish voters generally also approved of the social programs of the La Guardia years and applauded his attacks upon Nazism (he was more cautious in criticizing Mussolini). La Guardia also did well among New York's growing number of black voters. Aligned with Tammany, as many Irish were, La Guardia's standing among that ethnic group was rather low during his twelve years in office.³⁸

Many of La Guardia's supporters were drawn to him because of his crusade against political corruption and gambling.³⁹ Moreover, he was a highly visible mayor. He could be seen rushing to fires and heard on the city's radio stations on Sunday mornings reading the funny papers during a newspaper strike. "I felt," said the mayor, "that the children should not be deprived of them due to a squabble among the adults."⁴⁰ He believed New York City should have its own airport instead of using Newark's. To dramatize the point in 1934, he refused to disembark from his flight when the plane landed in Newark. The mayor noted that the ticket said "New York," and Newark was not New York. Eventually, with the aid of the federal government, the city built La Guardia Airport, which opened in 1939.⁴¹

As Jews and to a lesser extent Italians gained politically during the Great Depression, black political leaders also sought more influence. They won control of the Democratic party in Harlem and elected a few more blacks to city and state offices. In 1941 the voters sent Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to the city council, the first time that a black man had been elected from an area larger than a single district.⁴² The hiring of more black police and firemen and the increased number of blacks holding municipal jobs represented progress, but African Americans remained underrepresented in governmental employment, a mere 1.7 percent of the total in 1940. In that year they made up about six percent of the city's population.⁴³

Blacks in the depression decade employed a new protest technique. Several organizations banded together in 1934 to boycott stores that would not hire black clerks. The coalition included ministers such as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the colorful nationalist and anti-Semite Sufi Abdul Hamid, black and white communists, and working-class blacks. Faced with internal division and a court injunction banning picketing, the coalition eventually fell apart after achieving modest success when Blumstein's department store agreed to hire black women as salespersons.⁴⁴ Blacks also continued protesting against conditions at Harlem Hospital and won gains, including the appointment of more black medical and administrative personnel.⁴⁵

With municipal funds inadequate to meet the costs of battling the depression, federal and state monies were necessary and forthcoming. Mayor La Guardia turned to Robert Moses, the "master builder" or "power broker" to employ them in a vast series of city projects. Moses,

as park commissioner, quickly utilized Civil Works Administration funds to hire 68,000 men to refurbish city parks and beaches.⁴⁶ Later, using Works Project Administration (WPA) money, Moses also built roads, parkways, and other city projects, the largest of which was La Guardia Airport. WPA-sponsored projects also supported a number of New York City artists, musicians, teachers, and white collar workers.

Prior to 1935 the depression had curtailed construction, but with New Deal funds available, New York City had an opportunity to again erect public housing. The municipal government had already initiated a modest housing project, when the possibility of federal aid loomed. Utilizing federal funds, 17,000 family units were completed, a step forward but hardly adequate to meet the city's housing needs.⁴⁷ Also insufficient were the few new public facilities—parks, swimming pools, and playgrounds—constructed in black neighborhoods under Robert Moses's leadership. As Robert Caro noted, "Robert Moses built 255 playgrounds in New York City during the 1930s. He built one playground in Harlem."⁴⁸

As exciting as La Guardia's tenure was and as helpful as governmental programs were, for some New Yorkers more fundamental changes were required. Labor organizers sought to revive the city's unions from their sluggishness of the 1920s. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union, centered in New York, had experienced a drop in rolls from 177,000 in 1920 to only 7,000 dues payers in 1932.⁴⁹ On the eve of the New Deal the ILGWU had lost 60 percent of its 100,000 members in 12 years and suspended publication of its paper. The elevator did not "run at the union headquarters because there was no money to pay the electric bill."⁵⁰ With a climate of opinion supportive of organized labor in both Albany and Washington, unions like the Amalgamated and the ILGWU experienced a new militancy and made substantial gains during the New Deal years. By 1934 the ILGWU claimed a membership of more than 200,000, the largest in its history, and it looked to political action to win further benefits.⁵¹

Struggling municipal unions, like that of the badly divided teachers, faced a city short of funds. In response to the depression the Board of Education hired low paid substitutes and cut salaries and other services. Federal funds eventually led to new classroom construction and an expansion of educational programs, but the teachers' union would have to wait until after World War II for official recognition.⁵²

The experience of the predominantly Irish transit workers was somewhat different. Prior to the 1930s workers on the city's subways and busses were so poorly organized and paid that if alternative employment became available, transit men would leave the system. With the coming of the depression, alternative employment dried up and wage cuts set the stage for considerable union sentiment. Spearheaded by Irish-born Mike Quill, a core of immigrants who had fought for the Irish Republican cause, and communist activists, the transit employees established the Transport Workers Union (TWU) in the early 1930s. The union's first success was in organizing workers on the Interboro Rapid Transit line (IRT). The strong Irish connection was noted when the transit workers celebrated their victory in Madison Square Garden. TWU members marched into the Garden while the band played "The Wearing of the Green."⁵³ The first TWU contracts signed in 1937 brought important benefits to its members.⁵⁴ After the city consolidated the subway lines and assumed their direction, the TWU generally maintained its bargaining position in spite of La Guardia's opposition to the closed shop and to the right of municipal workers to strike.⁵⁵

Even the city's Chinese laundrymen felt compelled to organize during the depression. Conditions were bad enough when technological changes in the laundry business threatened to further weaken the livelihood of these workers. Then the large scale laundries persuaded the Board of Aldermen to pass a laundry ordinance establishing a \$25 yearly registration fee and requiring laundries run by one person to post a \$1,000 bond upon applying for a license. Both of these measures imposed hardships on Chinese laundrymen. Because Chinatown's most powerful organization, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, offered virtually no assistance, the laundrymen organized the Chinese Hand Laundrymen Alliance, hired a lawyer, and pressured the Board of Aldermen to substantially reduce the registration fee and bond price.⁵⁶

The ferment of the Great Depression in New York City also generated a renewed radicalism. Although the Communist party (CP) never claimed more than a few thousand members in the city, it had many sympathizers and influenced both the trade unions and the newly formed American Labor Party (ALP). Mike Quill, for example, was closely associated with the CP for many years, as were some Jews, in

particular some teachers, social workers, and white collar employees.⁵⁷ Italians tended to be more conservative than Jews, but radical Italian American politicians Vito Marcantonio and Peter Vincent Cacchione attracted a good number of that community's voters during the depths of the depression. Communists also made a special effort to win over African Americans, but although many blacks praised the integrationist positions of the party, few joined it.

Not content with New Deal policies, radicals came together in 1936 to form the American Labor Party. The party's base consisted of members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union of Sidney Hillman and the ILGWU of David Dubinsky, communists, and union leaders like Mike Quill and International Longshoremen's Union president Joseph P. Ryan.⁵⁸ The ALP, gaining most of its support from among left-leaning Jewish voters, provided a ballot spot for those who wanted to vote for Franklin Roosevelt but not be associated with the Democratic party and its New York bosses Ed Flynn and James Farley. It also provided a ballot place for the independent Mayor La Guardia, who won nearly 500,000 votes on its line in his 1937 reelection campaign.⁵⁹

The ALP, however, was a party hopelessly divided between the far left with its sizeable communist component and the anti-communists. The leader of the far left was Congressman Vito Marcantonio, La Guardia's successor in Congress from East Harlem.⁶⁰ As communists appeared to be increasingly gaining control of the ALP, the party split, and the rupture led to the formation in 1944 of a new, more moderate political organization, the Liberal Party. The ALP would disappear in the 1950s, when Cold War anti-communism dominated American politics. The communists reached the peak of their electoral success in the 1940s with the election for the first and only time of two party members to the City Council, African-American Benjamin Davis and Peter Cacchione.

Many residents of ethnic neighborhoods increasingly gave their allegiance to and received support from political parties, unions, and radical causes, as their traditional immigrant institutions proved fiscally incapable of meeting the economic crisis—one indication of movement away from ethnicity and toward acculturation. There were others. Ethnic neighborhood theaters found themselves competing with Hollywood made films and English radio programs. For example, though the city's Yiddish-speakers still patronized Yiddish films during the

1930s (some of which were produced in New York), and new Yiddish dramatic troupes continued to appear, the appeal of these endeavors to English-speaking second and third generation Jews was limited at best. One historian pointed out that most of these Yiddish cultural outlets "had lost their audience by the advent of World War II."⁶¹ The same was true for the Yiddish press, which had reached its peak about the time of World War I. Newspapers like the *Forverts*, the *Tageblatt*, and the *Täg* had many subscribers, but their numbers were declining as readers turned increasingly to the English-language newspapers.⁶²

Yet ethnicity and ethnic identity did not by any means disappear. It must be remembered that unions and political parties made direct ethnic appeals and built bases of support in ethnic neighborhoods. Also the economic despair and keen competition for jobs after 1929 called attention to racial and ethnic differences and fostered intergroup tensions. A study by the American Jewish Congress in 1938 claimed that anti-Jewish specifications in help-wanted ads were at an all time high. Medical and law schools also tightened their restrictions further against Jewish applicants.⁶³ The percentage of Jews in Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons fell from 46.94 in 1920 to 6.45 in 1940.⁶⁴ Yet some Catholics complained that anti-Catholicism and not anti-Semitism was the greater problem in New York City. Ronald Bayor reports that the often anti-Semitic *Brooklyn Tablet*, the official paper of the diocese of Brooklyn, declared that Jews were overrepresented in the professions and had nothing to complain about.⁶⁵

Jewish women, in addition to anti-Semitism, encountered sexual bias when they attempted to become doctors or lawyers. Quotas and other restrictions were common against women in those years. Moreover, Jewish parents, like nearly all immigrant parents, were more apt to support their sons' career aspirations than their daughters. Hence, many Jewish women chose to become teachers, a profession that required fewer years of formal education. As noted, Jewish women had begun to enter the teaching ranks as early as World War I. Those were mostly German Jews, but in the 1920s and 1930s the daughters of eastern European immigrants entered the profession in growing numbers. For them and their parents teaching had a relatively high status compared to other feminized professions like nursing, which was considered menial and "the bastion of Irish-American women, who controlled entrance into both nursing schools and hospitals." Most young women

received their training at Hunter College (limited to women), the City College of New York, and Brooklyn College, founded in 1930.⁶⁶

To many Irish New Yorkers, the increase of Jewish women in the teaching ranks and Mayor La Guardia's extension of the civil service to a growing number of municipal jobs seemed to represent a loss of opportunity. Appointment of Jews and Italians to non-civil service jobs in city agencies and the election of others to municipal offices appeared to be further signs of declining Irish influence in governing New York City.⁶⁷

Events overseas also aggravated conflict among New York's ethnic groups. The rise of Nazism in Germany and the triumph of Mussolini's Italian fascism triggered strong responses among many of the city's Jews, Italians, and Germans. Nazism even came to America. A few local Nazi units had been organized in the 1920s, but the major pro-Nazi group of the depression years was Fritz Kuhn's German-American Bund. Numbering only a few thousand members, many of whom were recent German immigrants, and centered in Manhattan's Yorkville, the Bund made strenuous efforts to win the support of the German-American New Yorkers.⁶⁸ It had little success in that endeavor, yet with its Nazi-style uniforms and salutes, the Bund was a frightening, ugly organization. It supported Hitler, verbally attacked Jews in America, assailed a Jewish boycott of German goods, and held political rallies complete with Nazi banners and music. In 1939 it conducted a massive rally at Madison Square Garden, during which an audience of 20,000 heard speeches in praise of Hitler. When a reporter on the scene laughed at their carryings on, she was beaten.⁶⁹

As the war came closer, the Bund was generally discredited and subjected to investigation by the federal government. Moreover, German Americans increasingly attacked the Bund and Hitler's Germany, and some reached out to improve German-Jewish relations in the city. In 1933 a self-proclaimed leader of Nazism, Heinz Spanknobel, tried to order Victor Ridder, one of the publishers of *Staats-Zeitung und Herald*, to support the Nazi cause, but Ridder threw him out of his office, and the paper became increasingly anti-Hitler.⁷⁰ Yorkville was also the center of anti-Nazi organizations like the German Workers Club and the German Central Book Store which "was stocked with books banned by Hitler." The anti-Nazi newspaper, the *Deutsches Volksecho*, also had many readers in Yorkville.⁷¹ Once war was declared, the government prosecuted Bund leaders, and the organization dissolved.⁷²

While not necessarily endorsing fascism, many of the city's Italian Americans admired Mussolini's accomplishments. As one said, "Whatever you fellows may think of Mussolini, you've got to admit one thing. He has done more to get respect for the Italian people than anybody else. The Italians get a lot more respect now than when I started going to school. And you can thank Mussolini for that."⁷³

Among Mussolini's more prominent supporters was Generoso Pope, editor of the city's major Italian-language newspaper, *Il Progresso*. Pope was connected to Tammany and had contacts in Washington, D.C. Until 1940 his newspaper was friendly to the Italian leader as were other Italian language newspapers and organizations like the Sons of Italy. However, after America entered the war, these newspapers and organizations strongly supported the Allied cause.⁷⁴

The rise of anti-Semitism in Italy, which accompanied the growing ties between that nation and Nazi Germany, had no significant impact on relations between the city's Italian and Jewish communities.⁷⁵ However, conflict did erupt between Italian New Yorkers and African Americans. Many Italian Americans defended Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, while black leaders supported Ethiopia's pleas to the League of Nations for assistance and condemned Italy for its aggression. After Italy attacked Ethiopia, black religious leaders helped organize the "Committee for Ethiopia," which was chaired by the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of the Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church.⁷⁶

When African-American boxer Joe Louis, who was idolized in Harlem, fought a heavyweight title bout against the Italian Primo Carnera in July 1935, Mayor La Guardia posted 1,500 policemen, the "largest detachment ever assigned to a prize fight," to keep the peace. While the crowd was not unruly that night, street fighting between Italian and black New Yorkers occurred throughout the summer. In Harlem, blacks on one occasion smashed the widows of Italian stores, and the number of Italian owned bars in the area declined. A few black nationalists urged that Italian-owned stores in Harlem be boycotted.⁷⁷

Another contributor to the climate of racial and ethnic tension was Father Charles E. Coughlin, the Detroit radio priest. Originally Coughlin had been supportive of Roosevelt and the New Deal, but in the mid-1930s he began to attack FDR and his policies, praise Nazism, and characterize Jews as dangerous radicals or as plutocrats who had too much power in the United States. His journal *Social Justice* and his

Christian Front organization held some appeal to Catholics, particularly among the Irish. Moreover, in Coughlin's view of the Spanish Civil War Francisco Franco was the protector of the Catholic church, so Jews, many of whom strongly supported the republic, earned his wrath.⁷⁸

Coughlin's vehement attacks on Jews aggravated Irish-Jewish tensions and stirred up anti-Semitism. Nor were relations helped by the failure of the Catholic church in New York to condemn the radio priest or the Christian Front.⁷⁹ Christian Front activities in the city led to several street brawls in the Bronx and upper Manhattan. In those neighborhoods the organization encouraged gangs of youth to break the windows of Jewish merchants and to beat up Jewish children. Jewish leaders accused the heavily Irish police force of doing little or nothing to stop anti-Semitic violence. One Jewish newspaper proclaimed, "We are tired of approaching a police captain, hat in hand, saying 'Please Captain McCarthy (or O'Brien)... My boy was hit because he is a Jew. Will you send a cop?' And we are damned sick and tired of watching the sickly Hitler-like grin and hearing the usual answer: 'Ah, the boys are just playing.'"⁸⁰ Incidents continued into the 1940s, even after the Bund and Christian Front had been disbanded.

That ethnic groups took a strong interest in events overseas was hardly unusual, since immigrants frequently remained close followers of affairs in their homelands. Although the Great Depression concentrated most people's attention on domestic economic issues, the coming of war in Europe was hardly to be ignored. As Hitler's armies overran Poland in September 1939, New York's Polish community joined the growing chorus of those opposing the spread of fascism. On October 15, 1939, an estimated 100,000 Polish Americans marched up Fifth Avenue in their third annual General Pulaski Day Parade. Beyond celebrating their Polish heritage, the parade marchers also grimly protested against the Nazi and Russian conquest of Poland.⁸¹ Other ethnic groups reacted in similar fashion as Hitler's armies engulfed their homelands. Members of New York's small Chinese community were no less concerned about Japan's war against China.⁸²

The most violent racial outburst of the 1930s took place in Harlem in 1935. The trouble began on March 19, 1935, when a black youth was caught trying to steal a knife from the E. H. Kress and Company on 125th Street. When the police arrived, the manager decided not to press charges, but rumors quickly spread that the youngster had been beaten

and killed, and when the police attempted to break up a street protest rally, crowds gathered and began smashing store windows and looting shops.⁸³ A commission established by Mayor La Guardia concluded,

The explosion on March 19 would never have been set off by the trifling incident described above had not existing economic and social forces created a state of emotional tension which sought release upon the slightest provocation. As long as the economic and social forces which were responsible for that condition to operate [continue], a state of tension will exist in Harlem and recurrent outbursts may occur.⁸⁴

Some authorities blamed the communists, who were very active in Harlem in the 1930s, for inflaming the crowd, but the mayor's commission rejected this idea.⁸⁵ Instead, after holding hearings and investigating the riot and Harlem, the commissioners specifically cited poor housing, health, and public facilities, as well as unemployment, inadequate relief, rundown schools, and Harlem's antagonism toward the police as the underlying causes of the riot.⁸⁶ So dismal was the picture the commission painted that Mayor La Guardia did not release the final report.

The commission made recommendations to improve social and economic conditions in Harlem. The city instituted a few improvements, and the mayor promised better social services for the community, including more places in public housing. Increased numbers of black nurses and doctors won positions at Harlem Hospital, and La Guardia appointed a few blacks to municipal offices. But little actually changed in the lives and status of the majority of black New Yorkers.⁸⁷

The depression finally came to an end with the entrance of the United States into World War II. The Federal Bureau of Investigation rounded up and interned a few German and Italian aliens, but the city did not experience persecution of an ethnic group such as occurred with the West Coast Japanese Americans. Ethnic groups like the Poles and Czechs also wanted their nations liberated from Nazism; hence, they enthusiastically supported the war effort.⁸⁸ Jews, of course, had special reason to support a war against Nazi Germany, and they too participated in the various civilian war drives with enthusiasm. Jewish students at the City College of New York complained that they were not asked to do enough to support the war effort.⁸⁹ As the horrors of the

Holocaust became known, Jewish leaders called for efforts to assist their coreligionists in escaping European death camps. Several rallies were held at Madison Square Garden, but these had little impact upon federal government policies.⁹⁰

For German-American and Italian-American New Yorkers the conflict appeared in a somewhat different light. The United States was, after all, at war with their homelands. Yet both of these groups also vigorously backed America's war goals. Italian newspapers that had supported Mussolini and Italian organizations that had praised him reversed policy after Pearl Harbor, denounced the dictator and fascism, and called for all out support of the American military. The *New York Times* reported, "The American flag was hung up and pictures of Mussolini were taken from store windows or turned to the wall in Little Italy on the lower East Side and Harlem."⁹¹ The first Columbus Day Rally held after American entry into the war featured professions of Italian-American loyalty to the United States and wild cheers for President Franklin Roosevelt. That demonstration of patriotism, held at Columbus Circle in Manhattan, was sponsored by Generoso Pope, publisher of *Il Progresso*, who only two years before had been an ardent supporter of Mussolini.⁹²

The city's most dedicated German Bundist friends of Hitler found themselves being prosecuted for sedition by the federal government, and several of the organization's leaders were imprisoned. But by 1941 Bund followers were few even in Yorkville, the center of German-American New York. When *New York Times* reporters visited that district right after Germany's declaration of war against the United States, they found that the great majority of its citizens appeared to be loyal and outspoken opponents of Hitler and Nazism. German language signs were "taken down from some Yorkville theaters and beer halls, and German movies were discontinued," noted the *New York Times*.⁹³ During the nation's first scrap-metal drive, Yorkville, a neighborhood of Czechs and Hungarians as well as Germans, participated eagerly. After collecting piles of metal, Yorkville youth hung effigies of Hitler above their heaps of scrap.⁹⁴

New York City benefitted economically from the war. Because nearly 900,000 New Yorkers had entered the armed forces, workers were needed to fill jobs in a number of war-related businesses. The city's garment factories produced clothing for the armed forces, and ship build-

ing and dock work boomed. The Brooklyn navy yard employed an all time high of 75,000 persons during the war, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and countless tons of military hardware sailed for the European theater of war from New York harbor.⁹⁵

All racial and ethnic groups benefitted from the expanding wartime economy. Even blacks, backed by a Presidential order banning discrimination and similar New York State action, found new opportunities. Black women won places as nurses at municipal hospitals, while black workers were hired by the city's bus and subway systems. Some unions that had traditionally barred black members changed their policies. These gains did not come without a struggle. In 1941 black groups organized a boycott against two privately owned transit firms, The Fifth Avenue Bus Company and the New York Omnibus Company, in order to protest their discriminatory hiring policies and their refusal to employ blacks as drivers. A hesitant TWU finally worked with black organizations to effect changes.⁹⁶ Additional pressure applied by the newly created Citywide Citizens' Committee, an interracial group, against the New York Telephone ultimately led to the hiring of six African-American operators in 1944; two years later, some 200 were employed by the phone company. Historian Cheryl Greenberg tells us that prior to this breakthrough there were only 230 black operators in the entire nation. Other protests led to changes in city and private welfare agencies' discriminatory policies.⁹⁷

Gimbel's Department Store "broke with tradition" when it hired 750 Negroes during the war.⁹⁸ A few other retail stores, large and small, began to employ blacks as stock and sales persons. But not all followed suit. A study a year after the war revealed that only about one half of these enterprises employed African Americans in sales.⁹⁹

Blacks in New York City, as elsewhere, experienced the economic recovery at a slower rate than did whites. The Fair Employment Practices Committee, established to fight job discrimination, lacked teeth; and New York City's black citizens continued to face widespread discrimination and segregation. Indeed, the WPA rolls became increasingly black, because so many African Americans could still not obtain other jobs.¹⁰⁰

Housing was in demand by all groups, and the shortage prompted the imposition of rent control. Yet here again blacks were the most deprived. Poor housing, inflation, low incomes, and tensions between

black New Yorkers and white police led to frustration that in 1943 exploded into yet another Harlem riot. An incident during a hot August weekend involving two white policemen and several blacks triggered rumors that a black soldier had been shot. The resultant riot left five blacks dead and many others injured. Little city action followed.¹⁰¹

Even Mayor La Guardia, popular among black voters for his criticism of those firms that would not employ African Americans, in effect accepted public racial segregation when he allowed the Navy, which in that era was very much a segregated institution, to train white but not black women in a municipal college and a high school. In addition, on the eve of the 1943 riot, the mayor agreed to permit the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company—not known to be sympathetic to black concerns—to build Stuyvesant Town, a large Manhattan housing project, which would be available to whites only.¹⁰² Metropolitan Life, although it had thousands of policy holders in Harlem, had "refused to hire one black agent in or out of that community."¹⁰³ The company had already constructed the all-white Parkchester housing project in the Bronx, but that had been on vacant land. Stuyvesant Town required the city's acquiring and clearing some existing housing and some tax concessions, thus making it a quasi-public project. Pressured by civil rights advocates to open Stuyvesant Town to blacks, Metropolitan dug in its heels and refused. The company had the active aid of the powerful Robert Moses who insisted that charges of racial discrimination were irrelevant because the project was a "private development." But winning the mayor's approval was another matter.¹⁰⁴ La Guardia wanted to improve the city's housing stock, and the project was an attractive way of doing that. At the same time, he could not ignore the fact that the development was quasi public, and he certainly had no wish to appear to condone racial discrimination. In the end, however, the mayor agreed to the contract, expressing the hope that the courts would address the issue and open the housing to all.

The triumph of discrimination at Stuyvesant triggered the movement for city enactment of a fair housing law. Pushed by Republican Councilmen Stanley Isaacs, Democrat Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Communist Benjamin Davis, the City Council eventually passed such a bill. The 1944 act did not cover Stuyvesant Town retroactively, as had been originally suggested, but only future housing projects. Thus New Yorkers put off until after World War II any serious effort to confront

the city's prevailing racism, not only in housing but in most other areas of life as well.¹⁰⁵ As ever black New Yorkers remained at the bottom of the city's social and economic life.

Tens of thousand of New Yorkers joyfully poured into the streets upon hearing of Japan's surrender on August 14, 1945. People were eager to celebrate the war's conclusion and anticipated the end of rationing, Broadway's dimmed lights, and the acute housing shortage. For them victory meant the speedy return of servicemen and women and a chance to live in a peaceful world. Yet New Yorkers, like other Americans, could not be certain of what lay ahead in either the nation or the world. Pessimists feared a postwar economic slump and a continuation of the racial and ethnic conflict that had marked the 1930s.

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Fears of a renewal of economic woes, expressed by some at the end of World War II, proved groundless. With the resumption of peace there followed a quarter of a century of improved living for most New Yorkers. A pent-up demand for housing kindled a boom in construction. The Great Depression and especially the war had curtailed new housing starts, and many potential home owners had accumulated savings during the high employment war years. New York City's many other assets also contributed to prosperity. For almost three decades after the beginning of World War II, its natural harbor continued to be a boon. As before the war, the city remained America's leading financial and banking center, and it maintained a solid