

Commentary

Before the Parades

Review of 'Victory City' By John Strausbaugh
by Edward Kosner
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ONE OF MY MOST VIVID CHILDHOOD MEMORIES IS OF RIDING IN A RED-AND-YELLOW DESOTO SKYVIEW taxi along the old West Side Highway in Manhattan in the early 1940s past the burnt-out hulk of the S.S. *Normandie* heeled over in its slip at Pier 88. The exquisite art deco French liner had caught fire while being refitted as a World War II American troop ship. Later, I saw the Swedish motorship *Gripsholm*, now ferrying exchanged prisoners of war, moored in the Hudson. I remember grocery shopping with my mother clutching booklets of tiny colorful ration stamps and waking up to go to school at 7 a.m. in total darkness because it was actually 5 a.m.—“War Time” had pushed the clock back two hours to create more daylight at the end of the workday. And hearing Edward R. Murrow on the radio intoning, “This is London,” in the rubble of the blitz.

The war years were grim, even for New York families without men fighting overseas. The supermarket shelves and meat cases were half empty (although good customers could occasionally score contraband lamb chops slipped discreetly into shopping bags by compliant butchers). The streetlights were dim, the cars were old, newspapers thin, every tinfoil cigarette wrapper or rubber band scavenged for the war effort. Hordes of ragamuffins mobbed candy stores on rumors that unobtainable frozen Milky Way bars might be on sale. In Washington Heights, where I grew up, clutches of murmurous refugees from Hitler would gather on the Jewish High Holy Days at a fence facing west over the Hudson—a makeshift Wailing Wall.

These flashbacks have been triggered by John Strausbaugh’s brilliantly evocative *Victory City*, a panoramic new social history of New York during the run-up to the war, the three years and nine months from Pearl Harbor to V-J Day, and the aftermath of the cataclysm. Even people like me who remember the wartime years will find fascinating new details on nearly every page. And for younger readers, the book will be a revelation.

It’s startling to be reminded of the number and the arrogance of the Nazis and their sympathizers in New York, which had the biggest Jewish population of any city in the world and more than its share of anti-Semites. In the late 1930s and until Pearl Harbor, members of the Bund in knockoff black and brown shirts strutted around Yorkville singing the “Horst Wessel Song” and cuffing the occasional Jew who got in their way. They staged monster rallies in Madison Square Garden bedecked with huge

swastika banners out of a Leni Riefenstahl propaganda movie. The Nazis had allies in the America First movement, which was primarily isolationist—as were most Americans at the time—but which also had its share of Jew-haters.

First among them was Charles Lindbergh, for a while after his 1927 trans-Atlantic flight the most famous man in the world. Lindy was a special admirer of Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe and was certain that Great Britain would fall. He led the last America First rally at Madison Square Garden on September 11, 1941, ranting against Franklin Roosevelt, the British, and especially the Jews. "Their greatest danger to this country," he harangued, "lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government." Roosevelt was surrounded by Jews, a sizable subset of his "brain trust," among them Samuel Rosenman, Henry Morgenthau Jr., Felix Frankfurter, and Sidney Hillman (plus kibitzers like Bernard Baruch and Rabbi Stephen Wise). Certain enemies of FDR's took to complaining about "Franklin Rosenfeld" and his "Jew Deal." Sensitive to it all, Roosevelt underplayed Hitler's Final Solution for fear that America's entry into the growing conflict would be resisted as "a war to save the Jews." He was circumspect about the Holocaust, Strausbaugh writes, until nearly the end of the war, despite the public clamor led by the writer Ben Hecht and others. Even a \$50-a-head ransom offer for 70,000 Romanian Jews was pigeonholed.

Jews are omnipresent in *Victory City*, from atom-bomb scientists such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Isadore Rabi, and Edward Teller to atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Harry Gold, and David Greenglass, who were later prosecuted by Irving Saypol and Roy Cohn at a trial presided over by Judge Irving Kaufman. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had launched *Superman* in the depths of the Depression. Now, Jews created wartime comicbook action heroes, including Captain America. (Wonder Woman, though, is a shiksa.)

The songwriter Irving Berlin (born Israel Beilin) wrote the two great anthems of the war, "God Bless America" and "White Christmas," and other Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths turned out the forgettable "We'll Knock the Japs Right into the Laps of the Nazis" and "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." The paramount gossip columnist Walter Winchell (born Weinshell) was Roosevelt's greatest PR man, exploiting leaks from the White House and his own fevered brain. "Adele Hitler" he cracked, "is an out-and-out fairy!" Jews are only one element in Strausbaugh's cavalcade of the city in wartime. He examines nearly every aspect of life. There's "Rosie the Riveter" and the growing role of women in factories, shipyards, and the armed forces, and the pervasive segregation of black Americans in the same settings. The Irish and Italian mobs had a stranglehold on the waterfront, where vital war materiel was dispatched. The problem vanished when the Feds enlisted Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano to tame the gangsters. Stars such as Tallulah Bankhead, Judy Garland, and Katherine Hepburn pitched in at the Stage Door Canteen for GIs in the heart of the theater district.

But all wasn't altruism. The crime boss Carlo Gambino cleaned up by peddling stolen and counterfeited gas-ration stamps. Black markets in everything from nylon stockings to bicycles, typewriters, and Eisenhower jackets—named for the Supreme Allied Commander—fourished throughout the city and nationwide. Some of the worst culprits in wartime duplicity were among the most respected names in American industry and banking: Rockefeller, Morgan, and Harriman. Strausbaugh has a masterful section documenting how subsidiaries of Rockefeller's Standard Oil sold aviation fuel to Germany throughout the war using tankers flying Panamanian flags. A bank cofounded by Averell Harriman, FDR's special envoy to Stalin, laundered money for an industrialist close to Hitler. The Morgan banks collaborated with others to set up the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, Switzerland. "Via the

BIS," he writes, "American and British bankers would maintain a mostly secret friendship with their Nazi and Japanese counterparts straight through World War II." The Germans never stopped trying to spy on the American homefront and commit sabotage. New York was a logical focus, especially because the mammoth Brooklyn Navy Yard was turning out and repairing so many warships, and so much war cargo moved through the port, the largest in the country. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI boasted of the effectiveness of the bureau's counterespionage efforts, dramatized in movies such as *The House on 92nd Street*. (The house used in the movie was actually on 93rd Street.) In fact, Nazi saboteurs who were dropped off from a German U-boat off Amagansett on Long Island early in the war couldn't get the G-men in New York to accept their surrender and had to go to Washington to convince Hoover's men to lock them up. FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt come alive in these pages, and so does the city's pint-sized, irrepressible mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, whose mother was Jewish and whose sister was stranded in Nazi-controlled Hungary. LaGuardia badgered Roosevelt until the president named him to command the nationwide civil-defense program, but the mayor was so manically disorganized that he quickly had to be replaced.

Strausbaugh's narrative is spiced with lively cameos. There's Malcolm Little—not yet X—in a zoot suit talking enough Daddy-o jive to his Harlem draft board to wangle a deferment. Sargent Shriver turns up as the duty officer at district Naval headquarters in downtown New York on what became Pearl Harbor Day. He was supposed to be monitoring military communications but got bored and turned on the broadcast of the New York Giant–Brooklyn Dodgers football game at the Polo Grounds—thus missing news of the sneak attack for hours. J.D. Salinger came home from the war in Europe with five battle stars and a French-German war bride, who promptly fled back to Europe and filed for divorce. Before he was Dr. Seuss, Theodor Geisel was the wartime cartoonist for the innovative tabloid *PM*, specializing in racist caricatures of the hated Japanese. There are some historical oddities, too. According to *Victory City*, the savage German attack on Guernica in Spain, the inspiration for Pablo Picasso's iconic painting, was actually a Luftwaffe bombing error. Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" was written as a retort to Berlin's "God Bless America," which originally had an isolationist first verse later discarded as the momentum grew for U.S. entry into the war. Anti-Semitic orators took to referring to Jews as "Eskimos"—a dog whistle for the in-crowd.

Rather than trivializing the book, these passing glimpses and factoids add to its authenticity and fascination. Still, there's not much granular detail about the texture of life on the streets of New York during the long years when the city was shadowed by the approaching war, the 45 months during which Americans actually fought, and the chaotic aftermath. Unlike most of the world's great cities, New York emerged unscathed from the war—now the capital of the world, a distinction soon ratified by the establishment of the United Nations on the East River. A 1945 newsreel called it "The Wonder City." World War II is history. The wonders—mixed as they may be—never cease.