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The Fiery Cross: The Klan's Fight to Save America

Abstract

The Fiery Cross, published monthly by the Ku Klux Klan out of its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, took it upon itself to address all of these growing issues. Through this periodical, the KKK was determined to spread its own views: opposition to the New Deal and its Communist-like programs, anti-immigration, and opposition to American involvement in the European war. In its publication, the Ku Klux Klan preached about the creation of an America for Americans only.

Keywords

KKK, 1930s, 1940s, progressivism

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Modern American History

The Fiery Cross: The Klan's Fight to Save America

In the years leading up to World War II, the United States of America dealt with many difficult issues, including the Great Depression, icy relations between whites and blacks, and increased immigration to America, as well as the ever-growing threat of the spread of communist ideology into the U.S. and the possibility of war. *The Fiery Cross*, published monthly by the Ku Klux Klan out of its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, took it upon itself to address all of these growing issues. Through this periodical, the KKK was determined to spread its own views: opposition to the New Deal and its Communist-like programs, anti-immigration, and opposition to American involvement in the European war. In its publication, the Ku Klux Klan preached about the creation of an America for Americans only. By Americans, of course, they meant white Anglo-Saxon Protestants born in the U.S., and they wanted to eliminate aliens' interference in every aspect of the American way of life in which they believed. The editor wrote that "Klanspeople everywhere [should] get into the fight and save America from the inroads of alien influences [that are] so apparent in our country today," in order to urge the rise and spread of the Klan.¹

The Fiery Cross was first published in July 1939, when new Imperial Wizard James A. Colescott took charge of the Ku Klux Klan. It was Colescott's decision to begin the publication in order to inform and unite the public and the "Invisible Nation" of the Klan in a

1. Ku Klux Klan, "New Imperial Wizard Calls Klanspeople to the Colors," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 1 (July 1939):

fight against "every ism of alien origin."² Many Klansmen across the country contributed articles, but each edition also includes a monthly message from James A. Colescott and a message from the editor. This message usually attempts to convey information regarding Klan activities, such as meetings, changes to the KKK's rules, and growth of its readership and influence. Due to the changing world that surrounds the Klan, these messages are not all the same as the years progress. In the first issues of *The Fiery Cross*, most of the articles concern issues such as immigration, communism, and the New Deal. Further on, in volumes three and four, the publication still focuses on communism, but also on U.S. non-involvement in World War II and the promotion of American unity against everything un-American.

While the periodical's main goal was to spread the message of the KKK, subscription sales also raised money for the Klan, and KKK leaders urged Klansmen to sell copies to non-Klan Americans. With the exception of its own propaganda, the publication does not have any advertisements until issues four and five of the third volume, where there are advertisements for the anti-dandruff and fungal cream Dystol, and the fourth issue of volume four, where a hotel advertisement appears.³ This lack of advertisements shows that the Ku Klux Klan paid for the publication of *The Fiery Cross* with its own money, raised through sales and member contributions. Perhaps more importantly, it also explains why Klan officials were able to write anything they wanted in the articles: they held sole control of publication funds, allowing

2. James A. Colescott, "Klan Opposes Every Ism of Alien Origin," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 1 (July 1939): 1.

3. Ku Klux Klan, "Dystol," *The Fiery Cross* 3, no. 4 (August 1941): 3; Ku Klux Klan, "Dystol," *The Fiery Cross* 3, no. 5 (August 1941): 7; Ku Klux Klan, "Po' Folks Vacation Headquarters," *The Fiery Cross* 4, no. 5 (July, August 1942): 3; Ku Klux Klan, "Dystol," *The Fiery Cross* 4, no. 4 (June 1942): 4; Ku Klux Klan, "Po' Folks Vacation Headquarters," *The Fiery Cross* 4, no. 6 (September, October 1942): 4.

them to speak freely about their beliefs. This is best demonstrated by the publication's direct attack on alien beliefs that differ from the KKK's view of America, including communism, immigration, and union leaderships by foreign-born people. One of the notable results of the publication's independence is the Klan's ability to attack differences in race, country of origin, and religion while claiming to be against intolerance. In one of its articles, "Intolerance Raises Its Ugly Head," the author writes that "a man should have the right to express his opinion."⁴ This seems to go against most of the other publications, as well as the KKK's overarching ideology of hating everyone except for citizens like themselves. However, if one reads further on, the author is actually supporting a U.S. Senator who was thought to be a traitor because he opposed a bill to increase aid to Great Britain. Later, the author compares this intolerance of the senator's ability to speak his mind to a dictatorship: "If we have reached the place where a citizen is denied the right to express himself, if it differs from the opinion of the head of state, then we are in the same boat with those who live under Hitler, Stalin."⁵ This is just one of the many examples that demonstrates *The Fiery Cross's* attempt to persuade its readers of the Klan's excellent character and attitude of perfection.

When James A. Colescott became the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, his first mission was to spread the ideology and actions of the Klan throughout America by creating the monthly publication, *The Fiery Cross*. The first, and possibly most important, goal of the publication was to emphasize an American way of life by blaming negative events on all people who were not American-born Protestants. While many of the problems from 1930 to 1941 were blamed on immigrants, no problem received as much attention as the Great

4. Ku Klux Klan, "Intolerance Raise It's Ugly Head," *The Fiery Cross* 3, no. 3 (July 1941): 8.

5. Ibid.

Depression and its effects. Since the Great Depression caused unemployment to skyrocket in America, the authors of the publication believed that the jobs that did exist should be taken by Americans first, not immigrants. They believed that Americans should come first in everything, from hiring in the labor force to selection of government advisors. The editor wrote that "Harry L. Hopkins has appointed a refugee from Nazi Germany to the important position of fiscal and economic advisor... this is another instance of a high government official ignoring Americans and placing a foreigner in a responsible position of the American government." ⁶ Thus, this is a clear example of the KKK's hatred of immigrants, because they saw them as a threat to the job market for American citizens, which was very small to begin with.

As the Great Depression progressed and Franklin Delano Roosevelt replaced President Hoover, the KKK and *The Fiery Cross* attacked the New Deal programs. The periodical claimed that many of the new programs were Communist or anti-American, and the programs it spoke out against included the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. In the minds of all the Klan's people, this New Deal response to the Great Depression was communist in nature, since it focused on providing government jobs and organized much of the labor force. The Civilian Conservation Corps provided unskilled single men with jobs, such as planting forests or building national parks and public roadways across America. As its name implies, the Public Works Administration focused on public works projects, such as building bridges, dams, hospitals and schools. The opposition to these two programs was twofold; first, the KKK believed that the creation of labor by the government was communist in nature and thus un-American.

6. Ku Klux Klan, "Americans Ignored," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 4 (October 1939): 4.

Secondly, KKK leaders argued that these programs promoted immigration since they were creating jobs for unskilled men, which at the time were mostly immigrants or children of immigrants. The Klan also declared that the Works Progress Administration had Communists working in the organization and that the Communists were using the government's money to spread Communist propaganda.⁷

The Klan hated another group, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, just as much as many of the New Deal programs. The Congress of Industrial Organizations came under attack from the Klan for being Communist and anti-American, since it would organize laborers of mass production industries to help the laborers gain bargaining power over the owners. While the accusations were mostly false, the Congress of Industrial Organizations even made its union leaders swear that they were not Communist so that these attacks would stop. Another reason for the Klan's opposition to the Congress of Industrial Organizations was that it was mixing white and black laborers together and even appointing black union leaders; this, in the Klan's eyes, was done in order to "create class hatred."⁸ The KKK's biggest problem with organized labor was that it resembled the changes needed for communism to flourish in American society, and one thing the Klan hated more than anything else was unnatural changes by forces from outside of America.

The Ku Klux Klan did not only oppose immigration because of its negative impact on labor opportunities for Americans, but also due to the mixed allegiances that came along with

7. Ku Klux Klan, "Communist on WPA Payroll Spread Propaganda at Government Expense," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 1 (July 1939): 4.

8. Ku Klux Klan, "Heat is Turned On Communists At Washington," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 4 (October 1939): 2.

immigrants coming to America in a time of war in Europe. Along with its anti-immigration message, *The Fiery Cross* also expressed the Klan's firm opposition to potential U.S. involvement in the European war. The periodical attempts to convey these two viewpoints from its third publication until the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the U.S. was essentially forced to join the war. One author claims that America should be for Americans and that despite increased immigration, the native born should be favored over the immigrants because one cannot tell where their allegiance lies. As one writer pointed out, "America has become more and more a melting pot and her native born in many sections are being pushed into the background by the flood of foreigners, most of whom retain allegiances to a foreign flag."⁹ Such questions about allegiance could cause an immense catastrophe in wartime America. In a later article, the Klan supports President Roosevelt's pledge to keep America out of war, and it maintains that America should be kept free of all entanglements in foreign nations in order to safeguard American principles and ideals.¹⁰ To help preserve these American principles, the Klan started a program called Americanism, in which it wrote about all the benefits of American citizenship and why the American way is the best way. While those articles about Americanism did indeed promote American ideals, they also encompassed the message that the Klan was the first organization to point out the Communist problem and the immigration problem, and how the Klan was first to oppose any type of American involvement in the war. This message of the Klan's groundbreaking righteousness was repeated frequently, almost as if they were attempting to build their own credibility with their audience.

9. Ku Klux Klan, "America for Americans," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 3 (September 1939): 1.

10. Ku Klux Klan, "Backing the President," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 3 (September 1939): 2.

Building on the Klan's hatred of immigrants, *The Fiery Cross* began constructing a direct correlation between the immigrants in America and the immigrants' desire for war to protect their homelands. *The Fiery Cross* attempted to show how further immigration from Europe could force the U.S. to join the war. This argument was founded on an objection to immigrants' ability to protest and lobby for U.S. involvement, which frustrated Klan leaders due to their belief that immigrants think in terms of their homeland and do not know what is best for this country. On the other hand, the "Klan thinks and acts in terms of America without regard to how it may affect" any of the European countries.¹¹ This would help the Klan affirm its power and loyalty to America while still conveying its anti-immigration and anti-war messages. The articles ask that the U.S. government and citizens not be influenced by "any foreign-controlled group," such as the Communist, Catholics, or Fascists.¹² One of the most confusing articles states that Congress should not hear Father Coughlin's calls for neutrality because he is Catholic and he has ties to the Irish people, who hate England and would love to watch it fall apart.¹³ This opposition to Father Coughlin and his neutrality pleas to Congress stems from the KKK's desire to prohibit alien influences in American policies, even when they might be promoting the same agenda as the Klan. Such an attacking article against supporters of neutrality was shocking, but a very smart and strategic move, since it built on their creed of America for Americans without alien influences. The Klan quickly

11. Ku Klux Klan, "Make Attempts To Influence United States Regarding War," *The Fiery Cross* 1, no. 4 (October 1939): 3.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

switched its anti-war stance when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor; after that fateful day, the Klan called for "Unity before Victory."¹⁴

The morning of December 7, 1941, the Klan's view on American involvement in the war changed radically due to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. *The Fiery Cross* began to publish the Klan's new message of "Unity before Victory" to attempt to unify all of the American people in favor of the war. The January publication was the first to carry this message in its shortened version to help conserve paper for the war effort, along with its plea for every American to help with the war movement. The Imperial Wizard canceled the Klonvokation set for April, because he believed that the money and resources used to gather for the Klonvokation should be saved for the war effort. He urged the Invisible Empire to calculate the amount of money it would have cost to go to Atlanta for the gathering and buy that amount of war bonds.¹⁵ The publication also warns Americans to stand guard against European war refugees, because there is no way of telling which are actually refugees driven out by Hitler and which are agents of Nazi Germany sent to destroy America.¹⁶ Possibly the strangest development in Klan news during the war was an article about the "Negro Red Cross" having a class held at the national headquarters of the KKK.¹⁷ Such an action by the

14. Ku Klux Klan, "Country Is Safe When All People In Nation Think 'Only America'," *The Fiery Cross* 3, no. 9 (January 1942): 1.

15. James A. Colescott, "Imperial Wizard's Message," *The Fiery Cross* 3, no. 10 (February 1942): 2.

16. Ku Klux Klan, "Americans! Stand Guard; Aliens Hammer At The Back Door," *The Fiery Cross* 4, no. 3 (March, April, May 1942): 1.

21. Ku Klux Klan, "Negro Red Cross Class Held At Imperial Palace Of Klan," *The Fiery Cross* 4, no. 4 (June 1942):1.

KKK seems unbelievable, but to show his faith in the program of "Unity before Victory," James A. Colescott allowed the class to be held in the building because it would help America win the war, and he believed that preventing something that can help the U.S. win the war would be un-American. During World War II, the articles in *The Fiery Cross* became more focused on winning the war through unity and conservation of resources, and they did not focus as much on the racial divides of America.

Although *The Fiery Cross* did embody the basic white supremacy message that one would assume a Ku Klux Klan publication would have, it also contained many other important messages about the Klan and its activities in America. The publication was determined to enlarge its membership as well as its influence around the United States by publishing articles about America and protecting it from alien influences. In its articles, the Klansmen warned about the Communist threat to American liberty and all that it stands for. KKK leaders also voiced their clear stance on the need for U.S. neutrality in the European war, as well as their opposition to the New Deal programs, since they were similar in nature to those of Communist countries. To all of these problems, the Klan preached anti-immigration as a possible solution that could help lower the threat to America. The most important goal of the publication was to emphasize an American way of life by blaming negative events that occurred on all people who were not American-born Protestants. Ultimately, *The Fiery Cross* was determined to fight for the America that the Klan envisioned.

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