INTRODUCTION

In April 1939, just five months before the start of World War II in Europe, Warner Brothers studios released the film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. The movie was Hollywood’s first direct cinematic indictment of Nazi activity in the United States. After seven years of wrangling with industry censors over political propaganda in film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was based on the stunning revelations of German espionage in New York City made public the year before in the sensational Rumrich spy trial. Employing Warner Brothers’ trademark docudrama style, *Confessions* warned audiences that German spies were at work across the country, conspiring to secure military secrets from U.S. defense-plant workers, threatening German Americans into collaboration, and spreading pro-Nazi propaganda to dupe Americans into supporting the fascist ideology. *Confessions* alerted Americans to the present danger that Nazism posed to the nation and admonished them to be vigilant. What Americans who viewed the film in the spring of 1939 did not know, however, was just how long the Jewish executives of the motion picture industry had been waiting to tell this story.

Between 1934 and 1941, Hollywood’s Jewish moguls paid private investigators to infiltrate Nazi groups operating in Los Angeles. Joining forces with other Jewish business leaders in the city, the executives of the motion picture industry provided the essential funding to establish the Los Angeles Jewish Community Committee (LAJCC). The LAJCC was the first American Jewish defense group established in the 1930s specifically to combat insurgent Nazism in the United States. Publicly, the LAJCC participated in interfaith and nonsectarian coalitions to fight religious intolerance. Privately, however, the group maintained a covert fact-finding operation, gathering evidence of insurgent Nazism in Los Angeles and beyond. Concerned that evidence of subversive Nazi ac-
Activity might not be taken seriously by authorities if it came from Jewish sources, the LAJCC partnered with civic groups whose Americanism was unimpeachable, such as the American Legion, to channel the information to local and federal authorities. Unbeknownst to the public at the time, the information collected by the LAJCC informed both the McCormack-Dickstein and Dies Committee investigations of un-American activity in the 1930s, FBI and military intelligence investigations of Nazi activity in Southern California, the Justice Department's prosecution of twenty-three pro-Nazi activists between 1944 and 1946, and a host of journalists and public-opinion makers throughout the period.

The story of the LAJCC, however, is not simply an isolated case of one American Jewish community's response to Nazi-influenced nativism in the United States in the 1930s. It is representative of American Jewish response to domestic Nazism. Between 1933 and 1941, American Jews in no fewer than nine U.S. cities, including Boston, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Seattle, and Portland, all organized similar defense groups to monitor and resist Nazi-influenced right-wing activity in their communities. Publicly, these local Jewish defense organizations also partnered with civic and interfaith groups in their communities to promote religious tolerance, while behind the scenes, they, too, maintained undercover fact-finding operations to monitor Nazi-influenced activity. Coordinated at the national level by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in Chicago and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in New York, these community-based defense organizations constituted an informal American Jewish resistance network that fought Nazism in the United States throughout the 1930s.

American Jewish response to domestic antisemitism in the 1930s has been well documented. Yet American Jewish response to domestic Nazism, a primary source of that antisemitism, is less well-known because the records documenting these activities were either destroyed or lost or have yet to be discovered. In fact, the AJC conducted an undercover fact-finding operation in New York City, but AJC leaders were so fearful that discovery of their “sub rosa” tactics would “give credence to the charge of underhanded Jewish strategy and corrupt use of Jewish money” that they discontinued the operation after eighteen months and destroyed the documents. The ADL also maintained an undercover
operation to monitor Nazi groups in Chicago during the decade, but those records cannot be found.\textsuperscript{11}

The record of Jewish resistance to Nazism in Los Angeles, however, has survived intact. The papers of the Community Relations Council of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation (hereafter CRC Papers) contain the record of the LAJCC’s eleven-year fight against Nazism in that city between 1934 and 1945, including the daily reports of the LAJCC’s undercover informants, files on hundreds of antisemitic and pro-Nazi groups that appeared in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s, and extensive correspondence between the LAJCC and the ADL, the AJC, local law enforcement officials, federal and congressional officials, and military intelligence agents. The CRC Papers not only detail the undercover resistance operation in Los Angeles but also shed light on the national scope of this activity. \textit{Hollywood’s Spies} draws from this remarkable archive to present the previously hidden case of American Jewish resistance to Nazism in the United States. In so doing, this book introduces a degree of American Jewish political agency and influence in the 1930s that has not previously been understood by historians.

Historical analyses of American Jewish political agency in the 1930s rely heavily on the actions and, indeed, the inactions of East Coast Jewish groups to aid German Jewry.\textsuperscript{12} In examining the adequacy and efficacy of American Jewish response to that crisis, historians identify several factors that shaped American Jewish political agency and influence. Among those factors, fear is the most significant. Whether expressed as the caution that informed the American Jewish Committee’s rejection of boycotts and public protests or as the timidity that inhibited American Jews from pressuring Franklin D. Roosevelt into action or simply as anxiety over “Nazi-like histrionics” across the country that many American Jews felt, historians conclude that American Jewish political agency in the 1930s was shaped by fear.\textsuperscript{13}

This book shifts the focus of analysis from American Jewish response to the crisis in Germany to American Jewish response to Nazism at home. In so doing, it presents an instance of American Jewish political agency in the 1930s that was shaped not by fear but by courage. Even though the covert nature of American Jewish resistance to domestic Nazism suggests fear as a defining factor, the undercover strategy was actually determined by the duplicitous and clandestine character of Nazi activity itself. The
Nazi and Nazi-influenced nativist groups with which the LAJCC and other American Jewish resistance groups tangled were conspiratorial in purpose and deceptive in method. They cloaked their fascist agendas in patriotic rhetoric and cast anyone who opposed them as un-American. In order to expose this duplicity, American Jewish groups were forced to adopt similarly clandestine tactics. The undercover response to domestic Nazism adopted by the LAJCC and its counterparts around the country was a strategic choice born of necessity. Did these Jewish groups fear a backlash if discovered? Certainly. Did the men and women involved in the undercover operations fear for their personal safety? Sometimes. Did these fears prevent them from taking action? No. In fact, American Jewish response to Nazism in the United States was marked by courage, a quality seldom ascribed to American Jewish political agency in the 1930s. By shifting the focus from the crisis in Germany to the challenge of insurgent Nazism at home, *Hollywood's Spies* explicates this facet of American Jewish political agency in the 1930s.

This book shifts not only the focus of analysis on American Jewish political culture in the 1930s but the locus of analysis as well. In assessing American Jewish political agency and influence in the 1930s, historians have relied on the actions of “the big three” eastern and midwestern American Jewish defense groups of the era: the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Congress. In the fight against domestic Nazism, however, the LAJCC rivaled these groups in political influence with Congress, federal agencies, and U.S. military intelligence. Yet the LAJCC is missing from this historical record. This omission is due largely to the LAJCC’s absence in the eastern archives that generally inform American Jewish political history: the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati and the Center for Jewish History in New York City. Those archives contain the papers of the ADL and the AJC. The LAJCC, however, does not show up in those archives because, while it did collaborate with the AJC and the ADL to combat Nazism, the LAJCC operated largely on its own, independent of its eastern peers. By shifting the focus of analysis to the West Coast, this book recovers the LAJCC as a new voice in American Jewish politics during the 1930s and Los Angeles as an emerging site of American Jewish political influence in both U.S. and American Jewish politics.
This shift in locus also brings the Jewish executives of the motion picture industry into the narrative of American Jewish political culture in the 1930s. For decades, historians have searched for evidence of the moguls’ political opposition to Nazism. Finding little documentary evidence with which to work, historians turned to the movies themselves in search of the moguls’ political activism. Some historians, disappointed with what they deem a paucity of films dealing with the problem, conclude that the studio executives did not do enough to combat Nazism, either at home or abroad. Domestic and international censorship guidelines notwithstanding, these historians argue that the moguls were either too greedy or too indifferent to stand up to Nazism. Others, however, find examples to argue that the studios did address the political crisis within the commercial and political limits of the era. This book brings new evidence to this discussion. It proves that the moguls were not indifferent to Nazism. It demonstrates that they did take political action to combat the problem at home, but they did so discreetly, offscreen. In fact, the LAJCC owed its very existence and its political efficacy to the moguls. Were it not for their financial support, the LAJCC would not have been established as early as it was, nor would it have realized the national political influence it did. While other American Jewish communities struggled financially to maintain their anti-Nazi resistance operations during the Depression, the LAJCC was blessed with the financial backing of the motion picture industry and thus became the longest lived and the most influential of all of them, rising to an exceptional level of national political prominence.

Yet Hollywood’s Jewish leaders provided the LAJCC with more than just money. They also provided the group with leadership and strategic political support. While the studio heads themselves were not personally involved in the day-to-day operations of the LAJCC, a special subcommittee composed of their proxies (eventually known as the “Hollywood branch”) met biweekly for eleven years. The Hollywood branch of the LAJCC oversaw the undercover operations from 1934 through 1941 along with the clandestine, national counterpropaganda campaign that the LAJCC conducted between 1937 and 1945. In addition, several dozen Hollywood writers, actors, producers, and directors regularly answered the LAJCC’s call when their celebrity or money were needed.
Finally, this book calls attention to the role that Berlin played in driving the most hostile period in U.S. history for American Jews. U.S. historians often gloss over Germany’s secret foreign policy to export Nazism to countries around the world in the 1930s, and thus, they overlook or underemphasize the role Germany played in fomenting political antisemitism in the United States. Yet it is no coincidence that the most antisemitic period in U.S. history erupted precisely at the same time that the Nazi Party came to power in Germany. Between 1933 and 1941, Berlin conducted a clandestine propaganda campaign to transplant National Socialism to the United States. As early as 1933, Jewish and non-Jewish leaders in the United States understood that Berlin was discreetly inciting nativist attacks on American Jews as part of the Third Reich’s global foreign policy. This book presents the scope and character of the “Berlin connection” to demonstrate that the virulent character of antisemitism in the United States in the 1930s was not simply social fallout from the economic dislocation of the Depression but symptomatic of a much more insidious political problem: the evolution of a domestic Nazi movement.

In order to understand the significance of the LAJCC’s undercover surveillance of Nazi groups in Los Angeles, it is necessary to appreciate the political context in which it was born. The 1930s was the most antisemitic period in U.S. history. In the three decades prior to the Depression, antisemitism in the United States was rooted in religious, social, and economic resentments toward Jews. Antisemitic stereotypes were so widespread across American culture that “whenever a producer wishes to depict a betrayer of public trust, a hard-boiled usurious moneylender, a crooked gambler, . . . a depraved firebug, a white slaver or other villain of one kind or another, the actor is directed to represent himself as a Jew.” These negative stereotypes nourished anti-Jewish prejudices that justified discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, education, and social clubs. To be sure, negative stereotypes and discrimination were inconvenient and demoralizing, but they did not prevent Jews from achieving economic success or threaten Jews’ physical or political security in the United States.

The nativist antisemitism of the 1930s did. While “genteel antisemitism” focused on Jews’ “private misbehaviors,” nativist antisemitism was rooted in abject hatred of Jews-as-foreigners whose “public misde-
meanors” directly threatened national security. During the first third of the twentieth century, nativist antisemitism persisted on the fringe of American political culture, waxing and waning with periods of political insecurity. The Depression, however, triggered a protracted period of political anxiety that set the stage for Nazi-influenced, racist antisemitism in the United States. Nazi groups, most notably the German American Bund, along with their Nazi-influenced political allies—demagogues such as William Dudley Pelley, Father Coughlin, and Gerald Winrod—led nativist campaigns denouncing Jews as foreign conspirators. These demagogues called on Americans to take political action against Jews and incited physical violence against them.

Nativists injected the Jewish Question into American political culture. Mainstream radio programs and newspapers, along with the popular press, the Christian press, public speakers, and politicians, consistently found the issue of “Jews in America” worthy of examination. They challenged Jewish loyalties and tapped into the age-old suspicion of Jewish separatism. By the end of the decade, persistent questioning of American Jews’ loyalty to the nation had generated considerable distrust of Jews in the United States. National opinion polls conducted by both Fortune magazine and the American Jewish Committee in 1938 found that 60–65 percent of respondents felt that “Jews had too much power” in America. Even the war did not mitigate Americans’ antipathy toward Jews. A wartime poll revealed that Americans ranked Jews as the “racial or religious group” that posed the greatest threat to American security when asked to choose from among Jews, Germans, Japanese, “Negroes,” and Catholics.

Nativist antisemitism also influenced U.S. immigration policy in the 1930s, preventing thousands of European Jews from finding refuge in the United States. Several times during the decade, emergency legislation that might have eased immigration quotas for German Jews was blocked by politicians who raised nativist objections to admitting even more eastern European Jews into the country. Meanwhile, at the State Department, antisemitic attitudes among “old-stock” Protestant bureaucrats were partially to blame for callous foot-dragging in processing visas for European Jews.

If nativist antisemitism tainted the conservative mainstream, it defined the far right. In fact, the prejudices of the conservative mainstream
may have inadvertently legitimized the political antisemitism of the far right. During the 1930s, America “teemed” with hundreds of Nazi-influenced, right-wing groups. Most of these groups were poorly organized. Many turned out to be ephemeral “letter-head” rackets fronting solo propagandists seeking to profit from the political anxieties of the era. In fact, 80 percent of Americans polled in the late 1930s had never heard of most of these Nazi-influenced groups. Nevertheless, collectively, Nazi-influenced nativist groups colonized the political discourse in the U.S. in the 1930s and incited the worst period of antisemitism in U.S. history.

The most extreme nativist groups emulated the Nazi Party in both form and style. Adapting Nazi-style rhetoric to American political culture, right-wing nativist groups injected the Jewish Question into the American political discourse. They railed against American Jews throughout the decade, denouncing them as communists, socialists, and enemies of the American way of life. The New Deal was a lightning rod for these antisemitic attacks. Nativist leaders assailed the “Jew Deal” as a socialist plot conceived and managed by agents of “Judeo-Bolshevism” and led by President “Rosenvelt.” Fearing an imagined communist fifth column, Silver, White, Blue, and Khaki “Shirt” groups, modeled after the Nazi Party’s brown-shirt shock troops, were organized across the country throughout the decade. These domestic shirt groups maintained private militias and drilled in urban combat techniques, preparing for the day when they would defend America from what they believed to be an imminent communist uprising.

Nativist groups played a critical role in transplanting Nazism to the United States. Throughout the decade, German steamers pulled in monthly to U.S. ports carrying large quantities of antisemitic, pro-Nazi literature written in English in Germany for an American audience. German agents operating in this country smuggled that literature off those ships and distributed it to their nativist allies. Nativist groups, in turn, adapted the material for their own publications. In this way, nativist groups channeled Nazi-influenced antisemitism into American political culture, where it spread like a virus.

The sudden virulence of Nazi-influenced antisemitism caught American Jews off guard psychologically and politically. By the mid-1930s, the majority of Jews in the United States had been born in this coun-
try. They were Americans. Socially and economically, they were on the move, in “midpassage” between the immigrant world of their parents and grandparents and the American middle class, when Nazi-influenced nativism reared up to block their way. Stunned by Nazi-influenced political attacks, American Jews withdrew, heeding recommendations from Jewish defense groups to maintain a low profile. B’nai B’rith, the ADL, and the AJC, in particular, admonished American Jews “to remain circumspect in their public behavior, to draw no attention to themselves as Jews, and to disassociate themselves from any group considered foreign to American society.”

If American Jews were caught off guard psychologically by the sudden appearance of Nazi activity in the United States, they were just as unprepared politically to deal with the problem. In the 1930s, American Jews lacked the national political infrastructure to confront such a national political challenge. Historically, American Jewish political organization was rooted at the community level. As Jewish immigrants spanned out across the continent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, each community established its own social and political infrastructure. It was only in the first years of the twentieth century that American Jews began to organize at the national level to address broader political problems, but even by 1933, neither the American Jewish Committee nor the American Jewish Congress nor the Anti-Defamation League had the finances, leaders, or political following to claim national political leadership. Moreover, ethnic, class, and political differences among the three national Jewish defense groups prevented them from finding the common ground they needed to unite. In fact, the relationship among them was so dysfunctional that historian Henry Feingold concludes that it is a “fantasy of the messianic imagination” to even think of applying the notion of “community” to America’s Jews in the 1930s. Absent a strong national political organization, American Jews were forced to confront the national problem of Nazism at the local level.

The LAJCC was the product of this decentralized, often dysfunctional American Jewish political culture. Yet the LAJCC was exceptional among its peers. While social and ethnic differences among American-born and European-born Jewish leaders often limited their political efficacy in the 1930s, ethnic differences did not have the same debilitating impact on the LAJCC. In fact, shared class interests among the LAJCC’s
members trumped ethnic differences to unite the group’s American- and eastern-European-born leaders. The LAJCC’s American-born members were the children and grandchildren of the city’s original, nineteenth-century pioneering Jewish families. The “downtown Jews,” as they were called, were middle- and upper-middle-class professionals, bankers, and businessmen. The LAJCC’s eastern European-born leaders were the upper-class executives of the motion picture business. Despite their common class status, these two segments of the Los Angeles Jewish community were socially estranged. The “downtown Jews,” concerned with their declining status within the city’s centers of social and political power, distanced themselves from the “movie Jews,” who were viewed with contempt by the Protestant elite as foreigners and social-climbing parvenus. When Nazism erupted in Los Angeles in 1933, however, the “downtown Jews” set aside their prejudices and joined with their eastern European cousins to combat a common enemy, an enemy that viewed all of them simply as Jews. Thus, the Nazi threat in Los Angeles broke down internal ethnic prejudices and paved the way for group unity.

The LAJCC may have been uniquely stable for an American Jewish defense group, but that stability was the result of its exclusivity. Even though the LAJCC purported to represent the entire Los Angeles Jewish community, the group excluded working-class Jews, whose left-wing political values and methods did not align with its middle-class political sensibilities. The working-class Jews of Los Angeles were predominantly eastern European by birth. Like the motion picture executives, the working-class Jews of Los Angeles were immigrants who had lived in America’s eastern and midwestern industrial centers for ten years or more before they made their way to Southern California in the 1910s and 1920s. Settling in the east-side neighborhood of Boyle Heights, they established a rich Yiddish social, political, and cultural infrastructure that included twenty-one different left-wing political organizations. During the 1920s, Boyle Heights was the center of labor activism in Los Angeles. In the fight against Nazism, the LAJCC distanced itself from the Jewish left in order to protect its members’ tenuous status as “Americans.” Thus, left-wing, anti-Nazi Jewish groups in the city formed their own resistance operations, adopting more public forms of resistance, while the Jewish elite of the LAJCC adopted more discreet, lower-profile tactics, choosing to address the problem in their own “American” way.
The LAJCC was also distinguished from other Jewish defense groups in its political efficacy. That efficacy was shaped by Los Angeles's unique “second-starter” culture. By definition, the Euro-Americans who migrated west to California in the late nineteenth century were risk-takers, people who were willing to leave friends and family behind in search of something more. In the first third of the twentieth century, tens of thousands of these newcomers arrived in Los Angeles monthly, among them nearly seventy thousand Jews. Arguably, second-starter traits were even more pronounced among Jewish newcomers. After all, most Jewish newcomers to Los Angeles were third-starters, having been born in Europe and having already uprooted their lives once by crossing the Atlantic. Ten to twenty years later, tens of thousands of them packed their bags again, “following distinct paths from their eastern co-religionists,” to claim their piece of the California dream.

The LAJCC owed much of its political efficacy to this second-starter culture. For eleven years, the leaders and members of the LAJCC demonstrated remarkable persistence fighting Nazism. By 1945, the majority of the LAJCC’s founding members were still on the board, and the two attorneys who founded the group, Mendel Silberberg and Leon Lewis, were still at the helm. Tenacious and tough, Silberberg and Lewis were American-born, middle-class, assimilated Jews. Both were World War I veterans. Silberberg was born in Los Angeles in 1879 to parents who were among the city’s original Jewish pioneers. Lewis, on the other hand, was a relative newcomer to Los Angeles. Born in 1889 in Wisconsin to German Jewish parents, Lewis had moved to Los Angeles in 1930 from Chicago for health reasons, bringing his wife, Ruth, and two young daughters, Rosemarie and Claire, with him. When Nazi activity erupted in Los Angeles in 1933, Lewis and Silberberg joined forces to create the LAJCC. Lewis served as the LAJCC’s executive secretary from 1934 until his retirement in 1946. Silberberg served as the LAJCC’s executive chairman from its inception in 1934 until his death in 1965.

Both Lewis and Silberberg brought valuable political experience and connections to the LAJCC. Silberberg was one of the most powerful attorneys in Los Angeles in the 1930s. His law firm, Mitchell, Silberberg and Knupp, represented MGM and several of the other motion picture studios, and Silberberg himself was also a close personal friend of Louis
B. Mayer. In addition, Silberberg was an influential “king-maker” in the California Republican Party. His political contacts across the state, combined with his relationships in Hollywood, made him the ideal front man for the LAJCC. Silberberg chaired the board’s biweekly meetings and made sure that the community’s most influential Jews remained active. Silberberg, however, had little to do with the day-to-day supervision of “Hollywood’s spies,” and therefore, he does not appear frequently in this book.

Lewis’s professional expertise and political contacts made him the perfect candidate to lead the LAJCC’s day-to-day resistance operations. In 1933, Lewis was one of but a handful of American Jews who could claim extensive professional experience combatting antisemitism at the national level. Between 1913 and 1925 (with a break for overseas service in World War I), Lewis had been the first executive secretary of the Anti-Defamation League and one of the architects of the ADL’s trademark low-profile Jewish defense strategies. As a leader, Lewis was discreet, decisive, and unflappable, even when his own personal safety was at risk. Over the course of his thirteen-year stewardship of the LAJCC, he skillfully guided the organization through the murky political waters of anti-Nazi resistance during the 1930s to establish the group as a new voice of American Jewish political interests at the national level.

Lewis’s political relationships were instrumental to the LAJCC’s political success. Specifically, Lewis’s status among veterans proved invaluable. During World War I, Lewis worked for the army’s War Risk Bureau in London. He handled insurance claims for injured soldiers and the families of those killed in action. As a result of that experience, after the war, Lewis became a leading advocate for veterans’ rights within veterans groups. When Nazism erupted in Los Angeles in 1933, Lewis’s stature within the Disabled American Veterans of the Word War (DAV) and the American Legion helped him broker an unlikely but crucial political partnership between the city’s veterans and its Jewish community.

Los Angeles’s second-starter culture was also responsible for the LAJCC’s undercover resistance strategy. For decades, political espionage among political adversaries and allies alike in the city was widely practiced. The white, midwestern second-starters who settled in Los Angeles in the late nineteenth century established a uniquely defensive, if not reactionary, political culture. These “old-stock” Protestants from the
Northeast and Midwest were “domestic refugees,” fleeing the influx of European immigrants who they felt had corrupted their communities with their foreign ways. Seeking to reestablish their “American” way of life, millions of them migrated to the last corner of the American frontier in the early 1900s, Los Angeles. Bringing their Jeffersonian ideals and nativist prejudices with them, the midwesterners who settled modern Los Angeles between 1880 and 1920 transformed the city into one of the most conservative in the country. To defend their new hometown from the forces that had pushed them west to begin with, the midwestern Protestants who came to dominate Los Angeles adopted political practices such as political espionage to ensure their hegemony.

By the 1890s, the *Los Angeles Times*, the city’s merchants and manufacturers, and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) ruled Los Angeles with an iron fist. The “business syndicate” fought tenaciously to protect business and political interests from “radicals,” namely, unionizing labor. For forty years, the syndicate employed repressive law en-
forcemen to intimidate labor organizers and regularly spied on political opponents to maintain power. In the wake of World War I, for example, city leaders funded a special branch of the LAPD to suppress labor activism in the city. The LAPD’s infamous Red Squad served as the syndicate’s own shock troops, spying on labor-union activists, harassing their leaders, and attacking strikers in defense of the city’s open-shop policy. The LAPD Red Squad was not unique among big-city police departments, but other U.S. cities disbanded their “counterrevolutionary” shock troops by the early 1920s. Los Angeles, on the other hand, maintained the Red Squad until 1938. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Red Squad served the interests of the city’s business oligarchy by suppressing unions, spying on workers, raiding their meetings, and framing labor leaders on trumped-up charges to secure criminal convictions. By 1930, the political culture in Los Angeles had grown viciously polarized. Decades of labor unrest had antagonized the city’s business community and radicalized the city’s labor force. As a result, during the 1930s, the Communist Party in Los Angeles was the second largest in the country, and the city became a hotbed of grassroots right-wing groups.

It should come as no surprise that political espionage was standard operating procedure in Los Angeles. Spying among elected officials in Los Angeles was rampant in the first third of the twentieth century. Mayors John Porter (1929–33) and Frank Shaw (1933–38) both deputized hundreds of private citizens to report on political enemies. Porter maintained a crew of personal informants, watchdogs, and amateur snoops to report on the activities of colleagues in the city attorney’s office and in the police department. Political espionage in Los Angeles was so widespread in the 1930s that the La Follette Committee, a 1940 Senate subcommittee investigating civil rights violations in the United States, came to Los Angeles to investigate. The committee confirmed that city officials, the LAPD, the Better America Federation, and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association had consistently “assume[d] a conspiratorial pattern of malfeasance” to maintain their political hegemony in the city.

Political espionage among the city’s many right- and left-wing political organizations was also common. In fact, the LAJCC may have modeled its covert operations after those of a prominent, ultraconservative
civic group in the city, the Better America Federation (BAF). During the 1920s and 1930s, the BAF paid members of the Ku Klux Klan, American Legion, Silver Legion (more frequently referred to as the “Silver Shirts”), and Friends of the New Germany to infiltrate and disrupt Communist Party meetings. The BAF paid high school students to report on “subversive” activities among students and teachers. According to Los Angeles writer and city historian Carey McWilliams, for twenty years, the BAF paid “a prominent Los Angeles clubwoman” to sit on the boards of liberal organizations and report back on those groups’ activities. The BAF turned this information over to local, state, and federal authorities to substantiate antisyndicalism prosecutions of these “troublemakers.” Thus, Los Angeles’s own political culture legitimized the LAJCC’s undercover response to insurgent Nazism. In a city whose local police force had a privately funded “intelligence squad,” whose mayors spied on grand juries, and whose civic groups regularly employed informants to keep tabs on their rivals, Jews spying on Nazis was hardly remarkable. During the 1930s, the LAJCC was only playing politics the way politics was played in Los Angeles.

This book recovers the story of Hollywood's spies for American Jewish political history. It is divided into four thematic sections. Part 1, “Prelude, 1933–34” sets the context for the creation of the LAJCC and presents the group’s earliest political activities and victories. It covers the origins of the Nazi movement in Los Angeles and discusses how the LAJCC came to be, detailing the significance of the Jewish executives of Hollywood in its creation. Part 1 concludes with the LAJCC’s emergence onto the national political stage or, more precisely, its backstage presence, detailing the role the group played in the 1934 McCormack-Dickstein Committee investigations of Nazi activity in the United States.

Parts 2 and 3 cover the period 1935–41. During this time, the LAJCC actively collected evidence on Nazi activity in Los Angeles and disseminated it to influential parties. Part 2, “Undercover, 1935–41,” documents the LAJCC’s undercover activities. It introduces the informants and details what each one discovered and how he discovered it. It also reveals Hollywood spies’ stunning discovery of Berlin’s intrusion into American political culture and the efforts by the German American Bund and its nativist partners to launch an indigenous Nazi movement in the United States in the late 1930s. While it is easy to read these chapters as an ex-
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posé on Nazi activity in Los Angeles, the purpose of these chapters is to reveal how that activity was discovered and by whom.

Part 3, “Resistance, 1935–41,” tracks the LAJCC’s evolution from a local to a national defense organization. These chapters discuss the challenges the LAJCC faced in disseminating the evidence its spies collected without compromising their undercover status. Part 3 begins with a discussion of the LAJCC’s strategic partnership with the ADL between 1934 and 1938 and the breakdown that led to the LAJCC’s emergence onto the national political stage. Chapter 8 details the LAJCC’s tempestuous relationship with the Dies Committee between 1938 and 1940, and chapter 9 details the character and content of the LAJCC’s clandestine, national counterpropaganda campaign. Operating in the public sphere as the News Research Service (NRS), the LAJCC provided leading politicians, journalists, broadcasters, federal officials, and lawmakers with evidence of Nazi activity in the United States, evidence that these national opinion makers used in hundreds of news reports, radio programs, and official reports to alert Americans to the Nazi threat in the United States.

The book concludes with part 4, “Legacy,” which outlines the LAJCC’s wartime activities and details the role the group played in establishing Los Angeles as a new site of Jewish political influence in the United States.

For decades, the historical narrative of American Jewish political agency and influence in the 1930s has relied on analyses of the actions of East Coast Jewish groups to come to the aid of their German coreligionists. That narrative is filled with episodes revealing fear and indecision as critical factors in shaping American Jewish political efficacy during the era. The story of the LAJCC, however, presents a different perspective on American Jewish political agency in the 1930s, one shaped by the political courage and determination of a different group of American Jewish leaders in response to a different political problem. Hollywood’s Spies recovers the heroism of the leaders of the LAJCC and their informants, whose selflessness has been hidden from the historical record for eighty years, and returns them to their rightful place in our historical memory.