Stimulated in no small measure by the popularity of the 1915 silent film “Birth of a Nation,” the Ku Klux Klan, which had been dormant since the 1870s, was re-established in 1915. By the 1920s, the KKK had become a powerful political force. Expanding its enemies list to include Catholics and Jews, as well as African Americans, the KKK enrolled almost 6 million members, many of them from above the Mason-Dixon line. Although the Klan exaggerated its influence, 16 U.S. senators, dozens of congressmen (the Klan claimed 75) and 11 governors made no secret of their allegiance to the organization.

In “The Second Coming of the KKK,” Linda Gordon, a professor of history at New York University, examines the activities — and the appeal — of the Klan. In its practices and prejudices, Gordon demonstrates, the KKK was well within the American mainstream, embracing attitudes shared by a majority of Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Gordon takes her readers inside the Klan and explains how it attracted small-businessmen, lower middle-class employees, skilled workers and women (a few of whom were “feminists”). She describes the organization’s symbolic objects — American flags, “Klan water,” swords and robes; its secret rituals (similar to those used by fraternal organizations); and its vocabulary — Klaverns, Klonversations, Klonvocations — which marked entry into “a mystical universe.” Klan meetings,
Gordon suggests, were a kind of folk theater. Most important, the KKK offered plenty of attractions. Seeking publicity (as well as secrecy), Gordon points out, the Klan mounted spectacular parades and pageants, drum and bugle corps performances, minstrel shows, daredevils and evening cross-burnings. Small clubs and activities, which featured Bible study groups, fishing and boating expeditions, fostered community spirit. Klan baseball teams played against each other's sandlot teams and even “aliens” (the Knights of Columbus and, on at least one occasion, a B'nai Brith team).

Gordon acknowledges, of course, that the Klan encouraged and organized acts of vigilantism and violence. Along with small- or large-scale raids, threats aimed at particular individuals or groups took a toll. That said, Gordon claims that only a small percentage of Klansmen did more than “repeat the rituals, pass pious resolutions, and go home.”

As she illuminates and sets in context the “underside” of American history, Gordon has her eyes on “the politics of resentment” in 2016. Appeals to 100 percent Americanism, racial hierarchies and xenophobia, she reminds, have always attracted support in this country. Far from spurning technology, she points out, the KKK used “the social media of its time”— public relations firms, financial incentives to recruiters and advertising in the mass media — to spread the word.

Conspiracy theories, she emphasizes, use valid information to stoke grievances, insecurities and fears. Klan leaders also made effective use of “fake news,” including the dissemination of “evidence” of Jews kidnapping hundreds of thousands of white girls and selling them as slaves.

Gordon reminds us that the Klan imploded in the late ’20s, amidst allegations of corruption, incompetence and sexual assaults by prominent leaders. She makes no predictions about the future of the political movement in contemporary America.

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