

Skinheads

**Who They Are
& What to Do
When They
Come to
Town**

Kenneth S. Stern

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FOREWORD

How can it be that American soil can, in our time, prove so fertile a ground for something as loathsome as Nazism?

“So Proudly We Hail” attempts to address this problem not by asking what makes a Nazi, for we all know that there are evil people and Nazism is, as Malcolm Muggeridge has explained, “a manifestation of pure evil.” The more troubling issue is how decent, loving, intelligent people embrace the horror of neo-Nazi ideology.

This film probes the psyche of modern Americans, some of whom are experiencing financial problems, others of whom are frustrated at failed careers. As the story unfolds, we gain insight into the process by which our neighbors and even our loved ones can be seduced by the darkest of forces. From the helpless who are exploited, to the modern-day Faust who would sell his soul to the devil for a moment's fame, the film demonstrates in simple terms the variety of character types who get involved in hate movements.

Imprisoned by the Nazis in the Dachau concentration camp in 1944, the German Protestant theologian Martin Niemoller wrote:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time, nobody was left to speak up.

Hate is ugly, but it makes us so uncomfortable that sometimes we find it easier to turn our backs instead of speaking out and doing something about it.

“So Proudly We Hail” is my way of speaking out. Through a fictionalized account based on real events, the film demonstrates how hate can be cultivated and grown into ideology.

The American Jewish Committee's *Skinheads: Who They Are and What to Do When They Come to Town* is a helpful guide to understanding who the Skinheads are. It also shows how you can speak out.

Lionel Chetwynd
Producer-writer, “So Proudly We Hail”

SKINHEADS

In 1967, when middle-class American youth was growing its hair long, a small, alienated group of English working-class youths shaved their heads and formed a brotherhood. They called themselves "Skinheads," and were known best for their violent anti-immigration views.

Skinhead neighborhoods, like the East End of London, had many new Caribbean and Asian immigrants. Skinheads frequently preyed upon these recent arrivals, venting their wrath with swift kicks of their steel-toed "Doc Marten" combat boots. "Paki-bashing" was discussed in the vocabulary of sport.

Skinheads of the late 1960s were fans of American soul music, and of an early West Indian variant of reggae known as "ska." (In fact, Skinheads copied their hairstyle from black aficionados of ska.) By the mid-1970s, punk rock dress and music were the rage, and the Skinheads seemed subsumed by these similarly attired youngsters, many of whom wore spiked hair. But punk was a fad. When it ended, the Skinheads remained.

In the 1980s they adopted their own music, called "oi" (a Cockney greeting), which has been called "heavier than heavy metal" and "music to riot by." Bands have names such as Skullhead, Prime Suspects, Sudden Impact, and Brutal Attack. The best known oi band today is Screwdriver, led by Ian Stuart, who described himself in the anti-Semitic Liberty Lobby paper *Spotlight* as "not the type of person to creep and crawl to a bunch of weak-kneed, pacifist lefties and two-faced Zionists." The "best" of Screwdriver includes such hits as "White Power," "Nigger," and the ever-popular tribute to mass-murderer Rudolph Hess, "Prisoner of Peace."

Skinheads in America

The American experience with Skinheads began in 1984. Skinheads calling themselves Romantic Violence distributed leaflets picturing young jackbooted Nazis in Chicago. That September, the group's leader was arrested after allegedly painting swastikas in Oak Park, Illinois.

There were only 300 American Skinheads in 1986. "There are now over 5,000," says Daniel Levitas, executive director of the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), an Atlanta-based civil rights organization that monitors hate groups.

While not all Skinheads are racists, most are violent. In fact, there have been clashes between racist and nonracist Skinheads. Although the former group is a minority within the movement, it is growing exponentially. Those are the Skinheads that concern us.

They range in age from 13 to 27, but most of them are between 16 and 19, an age span statistically associated with a high crime rate. Some are from middle-class families, some from poor families. Many are from broken homes. Most abuse alcohol and/or drugs.

“They’re the first generation of white kids who don’t expect to live better than their parents,” explains Leonard Zeskind, research director for the CDR. These are alienated youths drawn to a group with a sense of community, excited by a shared perception of living under siege. Like the New York street gangs of the 1950s and the California gangs of the 1980s, Skinhead groups demonstrate an “all for one and one for all” mentality buttressed by shared lifestyles, uniforms, music, and a disaffection with society at large.

Enter Neo-Nazi Ideology

White-supremacist organizations were on the wane in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Ku Klux Klan was no longer a force, and even though bigots in violent groups like the Posse Comitatus, the Aryan Nations, and The Order were active (banks were robbed, Jews, African Americans, and law-enforcement officials were targeted and sometimes killed), prosecutors effectively reined in these groups through vigorous criminal prosecutions.

But out of this disarray, an opportunity arose.

Records of the bank Screwdriver made their way to the United States in 1986, and many “lifestyle” Skinheads responded to the ideology of hate that Ian Stuart’s songs advocated.

Lyrics included such lines as:

*Nigger, nigger, get on that boat,
Nigger, nigger, row!
Nigger, nigger, get out of here,
Nigger, nigger, go, go, go!*

and

*Are we going to sit and let them come?
Have they got the white man on the run?
Multiracial society is a mess.
We aren’t going to take much more of this!*

A West Coast psychiatrist who studied Skinheads concluded that “when they exhibit violence and destruction, they are exhibiting their own unfocused frustration and anger.” Racist music and white supremacists—like former Klu Klux Klan leader Tom Metzger, now head of White Aryan Resistance (WAR)—supplied the focus.

Even though “most of [the Skinheads] cannot converse about their racist ideology, much less discuss recent history and the meaning of Nazism,” according to that psychiatrist, the neo-Nazi view of hate, of “us” being hurt by “conspiratorial” Jews or “inferior” African Americans, fits the Skinheads’ anger neatly.

We “are working-class Aryan Youth,” their literature asserts. “We oppose the capitalist and the communist scum that are destroying the Aryan race. We also realize that the parasitic Jewish race is at the heart of our problem.”

“Skinheads worldwide are warriors,” they proclaim. “We never run away, back down, or sell out. We despise the traitors, the cowards, the apathetic, and the limp-wristed queers. . . . Our heads are shaved for battle. . . . We believe that motherhood is the greatest and most noble position to which any white woman can aspire. We also believe in the family, with a dominant male and a proud female, as the best way to insure proper reproduction of our race.”

This is Nazism, and Metzger is, in his own words, “injecting” this ideology into the Skinheads. He sees in them an active cadre to replenish the depleted older racist organizations.

Metzger’s son John leads the Aryan Youth Movement (AYM). His predecessor, Greg Withrow, repudiated his racist past, and three months later was nailed to a six-foot plank. He says Skinheads attacked him.

AYM’s newspaper is brazenly racist. It displays “comics” showing blacks burned at the stake, and Jews as victims of “ritual murder.” It even hailed New York’s Howard Beach defendants “for hunting down and causing the death of Negro Michael Griffith,” and commended their “revolutionary efforts.”

Today, Skinhead groups are active across the county, practicing what they are being trained to believe.

In Dallas, a Skinhead was sentenced to ten years in jail for vandalizing a synagogue.

In San Jose, a group of Skinheads confronted a 54-year-old African American woman, wouldn’t let her pass, told her this was a “niggers pay toll,” and threatened to “string [her] up in that tree.” A 20-year-old Skinhead, arrested for robbery and false imprisonment, explained, “We are racial and she was black . . . We’re into white supremacy.”

In a Glendale, California, junior high school, a 13-year-old student pulled a loaded .357 Magnum and threatened to shoot a teacher. The teacher had not let him pose for his yearbook picture wearing a “white power” T-shirt.

In Doraville, Georgia, Yeshiva High School was covered with more than 50 swastikas and threatening graffiti, such as “The Skins Are Going to Kill U.”

In Springfield, Missouri, Skinheads attacked cars with bricks and baseball bats outside an establishment known as a gathering place for homosexuals. “Fag-bashing,” the Skinheads call it.

In Los Angeles, a group of Skinheads slit the throat of an Hispanic woman.

In Cleveland, Ohio, Skinheads, brandishing knives, chased an African American college student into a convenience store.

In Brookline, Massachusetts, letters were sent to Jews calling for their extermination. The letters were signed "Skinhead."

In Santa Cruz, California, police suspect some of the area's 50 to 80 Skinheads in a rash of beatings. The victims were homeless people.

In Glendale, California (at the same school that the student brandished a .357 Magnum at his teacher), swastikas and the words "No Jews" and "Happy Birthday Hitler" were written on classroom doors.

In Spokane, Washington, Skinheads attacked an African American truck driver with knives.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Skinheads fired shots into a car carrying five other teenagers.

Skinheads are active in over 30 states, including Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Skinheads have killed people, among them a white man in Santa Clara County, California, for the "crime" of bringing an African American friend to a party. A man in Tampa, Florida, was killed for being African American.

According to a law suit filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, White Aryan Resistance leader Tom Metzger sent agents to Portland, Oregon, in October 1988 to meet with a group of Skinheads called East Side White Pride. The agents "encouraged members . . . to commit violent acts against blacks and others to promote white supremacy."

The next day, Skinheads hit 28-year-old Ethiopian immigrant Mulugeta Seraw with "fists, a baseball bat, steel-toed boots, and other weapons." Seraw died. Two Skinheads were sentenced to 20 years in jail each, another to life imprisonment.

"Skinheads are dangerous, and growing increasingly violent," says Norman Frink, chief deputy district attorney in Portland.

Skinheads in the Media and the Schools

In 1987 and 1988, Skinheads were frequent guests of television hosts like Morton Downey and Geraldo Rivera. This free publicity added a veneer of respectability that undoubtedly helped the Skinheads grow.

Ever since a Skinhead melee on Geraldo Rivera's television show, Metzger and his WAR Skins have been given less air time. But Skinheads are finding other ways to share their message of hate and seek new recruits.

Skinheads are focusing on schools.

They are handing out leaflets, distributing publications (including ones that call the Holocaust a "hoax"), spray-painting graffiti, hanging nooses on black students' lockers, wearing Nazi insignias, threatening minority students, yelling racial epithets, and giving "Hell Hitler!" salutes during the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Baltimore-based National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence has documented over 300 bias incidents on college campuses during the last few years. And there have been many more in high schools and junior high schools.

Skinheads are certainly not responsible for all these incidents. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a recent survey of the Los Angeles public school system found that 37 percent of the schools had experienced incidents of bias; only 4.5 percent of these incidents were traced to Skinheads and other hate groups. "Yet," wrote the *Times*, "the presence of such groups on a campus appeared to contribute to an 'atmosphere of intolerance' in that there were more hate crimes reported where such groups were found."

There is every reason to believe that the Skinheads will continue to be active in the schools.

How Dangerous Are Skinheads?

The Skinheads are neither the Nazi SS nor the Klan at its peak. Unlike the former, they are not supported by government, and unlike the latter, they have no organizational center.

Yet there are reasons for concern.

Even though Skinheads are almost anarchistic in their violence, they are becoming more organized. People like Tom Metzger teach them not only how to hate but how to coordinate.

Whereas a few years ago Skinhead groups around the country were independent, and at times rivals, they are now starting to cooperate. For example, the Confederated Hammer Skins, located in Dallas, are aligned with Memphis Skinheads (who call themselves MASH) and with the Chattanooga Area Confederated Hammer Skinheads. And many Skinhead groups are reaching out to other like-minded organizations. The Old Glory Skins, for example, have a close relationship with Tom and John Metzger.

Although Skinheads do not seem to have the skills or the inclination to form an effective national organization, they are attracting more members. There are now Skinhead groups in Canada, Europe, and even Latin America, and all have committed violent crimes.

Another troubling trend is that some Skinheads are arming themselves with weapons more powerful than boots and baseball bats. Skinheads have been arrested recently with a .30 caliber carbine, a 12-gauge shotgun, a .9mm handgun, a .357 Magnum pistol (in a courtroom), a sawed-off shotgun, a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun, a rifle silencer, an AR-15, and components for over 30 pipe bombs.

Some Skinheads have trained with semiautomatic weapons. And they have been glorifying figures like Robert Matthews, the deceased leader of The Order, who advocated armed violence against the government, against Jews, against people of color, and against homosexuals.

What Can We Do?

Violent racist activity threatens not only individuals but entire communities, and therefore requires a community response.

Law Enforcement

Skinheads violence is illegal, and law enforcement has a vital role in combating it. The law-enforcement community is beginning to recognize the seriousness of bias-related crimes, and is adopting more effective responses.

Bias Crimes Reporting. No social problem can be addressed adequately until it is quantified, and until now, police forces have not even counted incidents of bias-related violence. Frequently, bias-motivated assaults are simply logged as “assaults,” and consequently, according to New York’s Governor’s Task Force on Bias-Related Violence, there is a “widespread inability for police agency officials to specify the incidents of bias crimes.”

Only a few states—among them Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania—now require reporting of bias crimes, although there are congressional efforts to mandate such reporting on a national basis. Once a uniform system is in place, trends can be based on data instead of anecdotes. And the public will know that government takes bias crimes seriously.

What can you do? Contact the American Jewish Committee to learn how you can support the adoption of hate-crimes-statistics legislation at the state and national levels.

Bias Squads. Some police departments, such as New York City’s, have developed bias units. These squads are specially trained, and they make successful prosecutions more likely.

A victim of a hate crime suffers intensely. There is no “reason” for the attack. The criminal attacks a victim because he or she is a homosexual, a Jew, an Asian American, an African American, or any “non-Aryan.” It adds to the pain when police officers treat the bias component as irrelevant or, worse, a “prank.”

Officers specially trained to be sensitive to these victims should handle these cases. A victim who senses sympathy from the authorities is more likely to cooperate with the prosecution, and will make a better witness at trial.

Bias units not only develop expertise, but also institutionalize working relationships between officers and prosecutors, and between officers of different agencies. More information will be shared, enforcement efforts will be better coordinated, and more elaborate investigative plans developed.

Contact the American Jewish Committee to find out if your local police force has a bias unit, and if not, what you can do to help create one.

Criminal Prosecution. When a crime is motivated by bigotry—be it desecration, trespass, assault, arson, intimidation, or murder—it should be classified as more serious and punished more

severely. The punishment will then "fit" the crime (the person punched and called a "nigger" is devastated emotionally as well as traumatized physically) and the message will be clear that society considers hate crimes to be especially serious.

Forty-three states have laws of varying kinds against bias-related crimes. In 1988, Congress passed a law against intentional destruction of religious property and obstruction of a person's exercise of religious beliefs. There are also federal laws against violating people's civil rights. When the most potent laws are strictly enforced, they work well.

In the mid-1980s, a violent neo-Nazi group from Idaho called The Order went on a rampage. The Order killed Denver talk-show host Alan Berg, robbed banks, counterfeited money, and shot at federal officers in an effort to achieve white supremacy through "armed struggle."

Federal prosecutors dismantled The Order through vigorous prosecution of civil-rights violations and racketeering charges. Twenty-two members were found guilty, and the group died.

A U.S. Justice Department investigation into Skinheads in Dallas, Texas, is now underway. According to the newsletter *Klanwatch*, the "investigation is expected to uncover possible links between Skinheads in Dallas and other areas."

Dallas has already suffered 40 hate crimes connected to Skinheads. Seven Skinheads have been found guilty of criminal acts. Building on this foundation, a large-scale prosecution like that against The Order may succeed. Of course, there are more Skinheads than there were members of The Order, and they are less centrally organized. It would take many successful prosecutions to dismantle the Skinheads. But even one vigorous, highly visible federal prosecution would deter Skinhead activity and recruitment.

The government appears to be committed to this goal. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh recently promised to "use the full weight of the criminal law against hate groups and all those who would deny the civil rights and civil liberties of American citizens."

What can you do? Contact the American Jewish Committee to find out what laws against hate crimes exist in your state. Ask for a copy of the American Jewish Committee's "Model States' Civil Rights Act," and about efforts to have it adopted.

Civil Remedies

Civil law can also be used effectively against Skinheads. Victims can sue Skinheads directly, seeking damages under state law and federal civil rights laws.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is the pioneer litigator against hate groups. It sued a Ku Klux Klan group on behalf of a mother whose son was lynched. She won a multimillion-dollar verdict, and the Klan headquarters was transferred to her as partial payment. The suit closed that Klan group.

SPLC lawyers Morris Dees and Eldon Rosenthal (along with the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith) filed a similar suit in Portland, Oregon, in October 1989 against the Skinheads

responsible for the beating death of an Ethiopian immigrant, and against White Aryan Resistance leader Tom Metzger, who allegedly sent agents to the Skinhead group to incite them to racial killing.

Suits like these can be powerful tools. The specter of a large civil judgment against Skinheads and their sponsors may act as a deterrent, putting them on the defensive.

If you or anyone you know has been a victim of Skinhead violence, call the police, and talk with a lawyer. The American Jewish Committee can help you contact a local bar referral network, and organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Legislation. According to the National Institution Against Prejudice and Violence (NIAPV), 17 states have laws making it illegal to teach or demonstrate the use “or making of any dangerous weapon or ‘technique capable of causing injury or death’ by a person knowing, having reason to know, or intending that such weapons or technique will be illegally used in furtherance of a ‘civil disorder.’”

NIAPV reports that these statutes “have had a palpable effect on hate groups.” More states should adopt these laws, and Skinheads should be prosecuted for violating them. An even stronger national law should be adopted by Congress.

Even though Skinheads have committed murders without resorting to semiautomatic weapons, there are signs that they are developing an interest in them. There is no legitimate civilian use for AK-47s and AR-15s. Although outlawing these guns doesn’t mean that Skinheads could not acquire them illegally, it does mean that Skinheads could be prosecuted for simple possession of these weapons.

Contact the American Jewish Committee for more information about its model statute, “A Federal Law to Bar Unauthorized Military or Paramilitary Training,” and about its support of the Assault Weapon Control Act of 1989.

Education

“I felt for the first time in my life accepted,” explained Tom Martinez, who had been drawn into a white-supremacist group after dropping out of high school.

His story is not unique. Many alienated youngsters from broken homes long for a sense of family, and find it in groups or gangs. The Skinheads may be especially attractive for these youngsters because the message of hatred is, to them, a message of love, of “us” against “them.”

Schools have a vital role in counteracting the attraction of these groups, and in empowering students to “just say no” to the drug of hate.

Programs. Junior and senior high schools should develop programs to teach students about the dangers of groups like the Skinheads. Showing films like “So Proudly We Hail,” followed by discussions, can be an effective teaching tool.

Contact the American Jewish Committee for discussion suggestions and names of discussion leaders in your area.

Plans. Skinheads are active on many high school and college campuses. Skinheads come to campus and distribute literature and leave graffiti. Sometimes, the Skinheads are members of the school community.

A shout of "Nigger!" A swastika. An assault. Each act tears at the fabric of a school community. Frequently the administration responds poorly or, worse, slowly, thereby increasing tensions.

Schools must have plans set up and ready to go when an incident of hate occurs.

Administrators must say, quickly and strongly, that there will be absolutely no tolerance of bigotry on campus.

The pronouncements must be followed by actions that pull the school community together and make educational use of the crisis.

For example, if a swastika appears on a wall, principals shouldn't ask the custodian to paint it over when no one is looking. Rather, they should make the swastika's prompt removal a school event, a ritual, with different segments of the school—faculty, staff, students—and people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds each taking part, passing the scrub brush from one to the other. Not only will this make the school feel more empowered, it may discourage similar acts by showing the swastika painters that their provocation "backfired."

This is just one example of how schools can react. To learn how to cope with hate incidents in schools, contact the American Jewish Committee for its working paper *Bigotry on Campus: A Planned Response*.

Multicultural, Multiethnic, and Values Education. Our schools have many goals, among them helping young people reach their potential; enabling them to function in modern society; and giving them the tools to be productive members of the work force.

To teach them how not to hate and kill one another is certainly just as important.

Some tragic racial incident occurs (such as the Howard Beach or Bensonhurst killings in New York City, or a bias assault incident on campus), and high schools "put on" a special program or call in a consultant. Colleges may add a few hours of human-relations orientation for incoming freshmen. These training sessions, such as the American Jewish Committee's "Hands Across the Campus Program" and its "Ethnic Sharing in Schools Program," work. By making students more ethnically aware, they reduce the level of bigotry on campus.

As important and effective as these programs are, they do not go far enough.

Schools need to incorporate teaching about pluralism into every part of the curriculum, from kindergarten through high school. Students must learn to appreciate and feel comfortable with—in

fact, cherish—their own backgrounds, and understand and respect those of their classmates. White students should learn of the contributions of African Americans, not through one-day-a-year events, but naturally—for example, through English classes that include writings from African American authors. In history classes, students whose ancestors came through Ellis Island, or on the *Mayflower*, should be encouraged to be proud of their heritage; but they should also learn that not everyone who came to our shores on a ship did so willingly, and that there were remarkable people here before the first boat landed.

Contact the American Jewish Committee for more information on its “Ethnic Sharing” and “Hands Across the Campus” programs, as well as its publications *Education for Diversity* and *Teaching Democratic Values in Public Schools*.

Community Responses

Intergroup Relations. Hate groups and hate crimes victimize entire communities, not only the targeted groups.

Too often, a swastika on a synagogue is seen as a Jewish problem, and a swastika on an African American church is seen as an African American problem.

Communities need organizations in place to monitor hate groups, and to respond supportively and productively when incidents occur. These groups should represent a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as other victims of violent hate, such as the homosexual community. By combining forces, vulnerable groups gain support, and make the police, the prosecutors, the courts, the schools, and the media more responsive to everyone’s needs.

Contact the American Jewish Committee for the names of human-relations organizations in your area.

Community Education. Community groups of every type—churches, Y’s, professional societies—should educate their members about hate groups and hate crimes.

Programs can include showings of films like “So Proudly We Hail” which can be followed by discussions.

For examples, police department representatives can talk about hate groups in the community, assess law enforcement’s response, and provide information about hate-crime legislation. Media representatives can discuss how the media treats hate groups—does coverage make them more attractive to youngsters, or expose their viciousness?

Social scientists from local universities can discuss questions like: What makes people want to hate each other? In what type of social climate does bigotry thrive? Under what conditions does bigotry threaten to influence, or even become, government policy?

Groups that may differ over other issues might sponsor common forums to discuss this common threat. Clergy can play an especially productive role here.

The American Jewish Committee can help you organize such programs.

What Can the Individual Do?

In addition to joining and supporting efforts to fight hate and hate groups like the Skinheads, there are two specific things individuals can do.

- (1) If you witness any hate-group activity, report it immediately to your local police.
- (2) When you hear people say something bigoted, tell them that they are wrong.

In fact, telling people that bigoted attitudes are unacceptable may be the most important thing you can do.

How many times have you heard friends, coworkers, or family say bigoted things about others? It is always hard to know how to respond. No one wants to offend anyone. We feel uncomfortable, and let the remark go by.

But this is how hatred flourishes, how it is learned.

Skinheads bring raw racism into the open. As long as the public expression of such ideas is considered beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, the hatemongers can be controlled.

The best way to insure that public expressions of racism remain unacceptable is to make private expressions taboo too.

When someone, even jokingly, says "All Italians are" this, or "All blacks are" that, stop them. Say, "That's untrue, bigoted, and I won't listen to such talk."

Our children must learn, from example, that hateful and demeaning statements about others are unacceptable.

If every child learns this lesson, no youngster will want to be a Skinhead.