

The Ku Klux Klan

"Hegel says somewhere that upon the stage of universal history all great events and personalities re-appear in one fashion or another. He forgot to add that on the first occasion they appear as a tragedy; on the second, as a farce."

—Eighteenth Brumaire—Marx.

ORIGINALLY the Ku Klux Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in May, 1866. It was born out of the attempt of the defeated Southern plantation owners to retrieve some of the losses which they had incurred as a ruling class as a result of the victory of the Northern capitalists.

Immediately after the end of the Civil War groups of "carpet-baggers" (Northern politicians) mostly from the republican party which was the party of Northern capital, took hold of the political machinery of the South. However, finding themselves unable to cope with the rich of the South they had to find and develop some new forces so as to utilize it for the purpose of crushing the Southern landowners to the wishes of the Northern capitalists. The newly liberated Negroes gave them their opportunity.

The Southern plantation owners in their struggle to retain their former position and to drive the Negroes back to as great a degree of slavery as possible organized both secretly and openly. The Ku Klux Klan was the most effective of all its organizations because it did not follow the rules of "democracy" laid down by Northern capitalism but instead made its own code which, of course, came into sharp conflict with the federal government.

The constitution of the old klan states that its purpose is to aid the widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers, but this was only a symbol. It limited its membership to those living in the Southern states which participated in the secession movement against the North; it excluded from its membership those who had fought on the Northern side in the Civil War; it declared itself particularly to be an organ for fighting the republican party and taking away the control of the recently liberated Negroes from that party; its salute was the salute of the Southern Army during the Civil War.

Those writers who have written favorably of this organization boast that soon after it began to function effectively, the "hitherto unstable and increasingly independent labor element, particularly the Negroes, were now under control." The methods used by the klan were extremely terroristic similar to those of the modern fascists but peppered with American vigor. The contest between the Northern and the Southern politicians grew very much sharper as each representing the various sections of the ruling class tried to use the existing situation for their own benefit: the Northerners using as their weapon the federal government, who on the surface simply fought the terroristic acts of the secret societies of the South, and the Southerners using these secret organizations.

By 1868, the situation became so sharp that the federal government and a number of the state governments under the control of the republican party proceeded to take action against the Ku Klux Klan. Thus, during that year, in various states, laws were passed making membership in the Ku Klux Klan a crime against the state and imposing severe penalties. The movement to crush the klan became so drastic that finally General Forrest, who was the "Grand Wizard" of the klan, in February 1869 issued a proclamation dissolving the organization. It is important to note in this connection that the dissolution of the klan did not mean that the Southern landowners had been completely defeated. The issue had been, as raised in the South, whether the newly liberated Negro shall be allowed to develop to the point where he become a political force who, by very fact of his great numbers, could overwhelm the Southern capitalists. It was only after the Northern capitalists had promised that it would not permit such a condition by withdrawing its army and recalling its imposed politicians that Southern capitalism liquidated its "extra-legal" method. Thus, in the dissolution order for the original Ku Klux Klan the Grand Wizard said:

"The Invisible Empire has accomplished the purpose for which it was organized. Civil law now affords ample protection to life, liberty and property. . . The better elements of society are no longer in dread for the safety of their property. . ."

The official order of dissolution did not however actually dissolve the klan. It continued to exist in localities throughout the South until the Southern landowners were absolutely assured that the Northern ruling class really intended to permit them the use of the federal government to protect their interests against the new-born proletariat. By the end of the 19th century the remnants of this Ku Klux Klan had gone into complete oblivion. It was only the most outstanding of a number of organizations which had been created by the ruling class of the South in defiance of the ruling class of the North in order to maintain the specially severe conditions of exploitation which were necessary to the Southern landowners if they were to thrive.

By SAM DARCY

The modern Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1915 by Colonel Wm. Joseph Simmons, a Southern adventurer. The klan actually had no growth and was merely a small sect. It had copied all the rituals, costumes and other mummery from the original klan. Its attempt to utilize the tradition of the klan of the previous century was farcical, however, and no one paid any serious attention to it. Where in the nineteenth century the klan did its tragic work for a defeated class who did not have the machinery of the federal government at their command, the klan of the twentieth century was created to serve the bourgeoisie who did have the federal state machinery but yet wanted this extra-legal method to maintain conditions of exploitation that even the federal government did not dare to champion openly.

With the end of the World War there came a tremendous industrialization and trustification of production—greater than America, and probably the entire world had ever seen before. This did not leave the South untouched but on the contrary introduced manufacturing to so great a degree that now large masses of Negroes were drawn away from the plantations into industry. Thus the proletarianization of important sections of the Southern Negroes gave this hitherto apathetic mass new possibilities of organization as a class for struggle against their Southern masters for better conditions. This was enhanced by the soldiers, both Negro and poor white, returning from the war, who had had a consciousness of their power instilled in them by what they had experienced, and now began asserting themselves.

The Ku Klux Klan in their propaganda utilized these various dangers to the rulers for stirring the bourgeoisie and their agents to greater efforts to suppress the lower classes. One news bulletin issued by their "Exalted Cyclops" says:

" . . . not many months ago there was a riot in the Negro district (Norfolk, Va.) caused by Negro soldiers attacking a district police station to release a Negro prisoner. . . He (the police commissioner who had joined the Ku Klux Klan) welcomed us. . . Our military company is to be trained and 260 repeating rifles will be turned over to us in time of trouble."

In Mobile, Alabama, the workers in the government shipyards had gone on strike. These events were symptomatic of the conditions all over the South. The steel strike was then beginning to extend its scope into the Southern steel mills. This was all utilized in the propaganda of the klan. Their bulletins and newspapers and the speeches of their leading figures are full of references to the threatening danger of an organized working class. Simmons says in one article:

"Americans do not realize that they sleep on a Red Volcano's edge."

In the "Searchlight" the organ of the klan, an article is printed in which they warn that the "Third International of Moscow. . . is working to overthrow all the. . . governments of the world."

This propaganda was not enough however. If the klan was to mobilize the middle class as was its aim,

it had to raise some issues affecting its potential members in their community. Thus it raised the issue which was of long standing among the Southern professional and business elements, of keeping the Negro in a state of social and economic inferiority. The manifestations of increased consciousness among the Negroes made such propaganda as this very effective among these elements. The middle class having always hid their unmoral sex life by highly moral pretenses, now raised the cry of saving the respectability of bourgeois family life (they only threatened it!). The South being overwhelmingly protestant in religion and the middle class being very bigoted in their protestantism, the klan also raised the cry as to the danger of catholicism from Rome seizing the United States government. They utilized for this purpose an alleged document issued by Pope Leo XIII, in which he asserts that the American continent belongs to him and his church by virtue of its discovery by a catholic, Columbus, and the time is soon coming when he will take forcible possession, at which time "it will be the duty of the faithful to exterminate all heretics found within the jurisdiction of the United States."

This propaganda against social equality for the Negro, against the danger of a growing proletariat, and for religious bigotry appealed tremendously to the Southern middle class and there can be no doubt but that large numbers were drawn into the Ku Klux Klan and a still larger number influenced by its propaganda. A careful perusal of the propaganda, leaflets, booklets, etc. issued by the klan clearly shows that it was all aimed to appeal to the economic interest and social priggishness of the petty bourgeoisie of the South. The actual membership, however, has been grossly exaggerated. In 1921, at the time when the organization was reaching its height, a congressional investigation showed it to have a total membership of 85,126 on its books while the newspapers throughout the country were declaring it to have 500,000 to 700,000 members.

Until 1923, the organization increased its membership somewhat, but since then the organization disintegrated through exposure of its mummery, through internal factional struggle by leaders and groups of leaders for power and through severe attacks by other organizations. Today, it is safe to say that their strength is approximately what it was in 1921, about 80,000 members and this largely confined to the South, and a small part in the West.

Actually the klan has failed to accomplish any serious purpose. The bourgeoisie can thank the American Federation of Labor far more than the Ku Klux Klan for the poor condition of Southern labor since it was the A. F. of L. that prevented the workers from being organized. The klan's circus methods of work attracted far too much attention to the situation. The bourgeoisie of the present period in America have more subtle methods than the crude weapon of the nineteenth century klan. The klan will only serve as an emergency organization for use when the workers defeat the present methods of the bosses.

The bourgeoisie will at any moment that its established state machinery fails to function sufficiently smoothly strengthen such fascist organizations as the Ku Klux Klan as "extra-legal" methods of fighting the proletariat or sections of it.

