

Fifth Column—with American Labels

UNDERCOVER. By John Roy Carlson. 544 pp. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. \$3.50.

By EDWARD N. JENKS

“UNDERCOVER” is the first-hand account of a man who spent four years as an unofficial investigator of the anti-democratic underworld of the United States. John Roy Carlson decided to investigate native American fascism in the fall of 1938, after finding a scurrilous anti-Semitic pamphlet on a New York subway train. Calling at the address given in the pamphlet, he found it to be the headquarters of the American Nationalist party and the distribution point for a vast quantity of domestic and imported subversive literature.

Shocked by his discovery and by its implications, he decided to “join the movement” and, by working from within, to learn what he could of its activities and connections. During the next four years he joined or became affiliated with more than thirty groups which sought, as one of their members put it, to “sour-up” democracy. The Christian Front, Christian Mobilizers, American Destiny party and the Phalanx, a secret gun club, were among the groups which he investigated.

“Y’know, there aren’t many of us, but we can sure raise plenty of hell,” George Banahan (alias Hermann Schmidt, alias Mike Strahinsky), commandant of a se-

cret military organization known as the Iron Guard, confided to the investigator over a beer one evening at the German-American Athletic Club. “A pinch of salt isn’t much, but throw it in your coffee, and regardless of how much sugar you put in, you’ll still taste the salt. We are that salt, and we’re here to sour up this democracy.”

Mr. Carlson’s one-man investigation of the souring process led him into backroom printing shops where quantities of anti-Semitic pamphlets and stickers were turned out, to mass meetings where the fears and prejudices of listeners were played on by skillful orators, to lofts where members met secretly to practice target shooting, rioting and alley fighting.

It is a sordid story, rather sensationally told, and perhaps dated by its sensationalism. Most of it has been told before and told better. As an account of the author’s personal experiences, it is sometimes hair-raising, but those who turn to it as a source of additional information about the activities of subversive groups in the United States will find it disappointing.

Its documentation includes little material that was not easily obtainable, between 1937 and 1942, by any amateur investigator

Most of the factual material in the book has appeared before, and

the activities of the groups have been well investigated by Federal agencies. Certain of the leaders mentioned by Mr. Carlson are already in jail for seditious activity, others are awaiting trial, and many—though certainly not all the rest, have disassociated themselves from the movement.

This is not to suggest that a careful study of nativism (the philosophy of America for the Americans, and America First), would not be useful. Such a study would be most useful, but this is not it. If nativism is to be kept within bounds, the need is for education in democratic thinking and for understanding of the conditions which give rise to nativist movements. The movement is not new to this country. It has flourished here, as in other countries, in periods of depression, change and war, drawing its members from the economically insecure and emotionally unstable.

A more objective and analytical study of contemporary nativism is Donald S. Strong’s “Organized Anti-Semitism in America,” published in 1941 by the American Council on Public Affairs. Mr. Carlson’s “Undercover” may shock readers with its first-hand account of the very real activities of the political underworld. But it is not likely to help them to appraise its potentialities or see the movement in perspective.