

# **Portland History In Review: A Hundred Little Hitlers**

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## I

At the end of a recent forum in Portland on Elinor Langer's important new book on the rise of neo-fascist groups in the U.S., *A Hundred Little Hitlers*, someone in the audience rose and asked an embarrassing question.

The panel, which was assembled by the Oregon Council on Humanities, was full of heavy hitters. Four white guys, including the president of Reed College and an editor of the *Oregonian*, a historian and somebody whose title I've forgotten, were suited up and ready to take on questions of evil and racism. Langer and Kathleen Sadaat, a respected African-American community activist, were also present.

At the end of the presentation, it was obvious that the audience wanted more than the meandering abstractions that were offered up. One woman went to the front of the stage and talked movingly about the recent attack on her husband in downtown Portland. His attackers mistook him for an Arab man before they put him in the hospital. One of the first shouted questions (the organizers of the event evidently did not plan on participation - there were no microphones in the audience), was the embarrassing one: "What do you do when you discover that there are nazi skinheads in your community?"

As is usually the case at such events, the answer did not come from the panel.

Let us imagine instead that the auditorium was filled with the people who spent a good amount of their waking hours a little over a dozen years ago trying to drive nazi skinheads out of Portland. The lecture hall could not have contained the hundreds, indeed thousands of people who were part of that effort. But before we question the audience, let's acknowledge a debt.

## II

Those of us who hate neo-fascists and neofascism owe Elinor Langer a debt of thanks.

The first, belated, thanks are for the publication of her magazine-length article on nazi boneheads in a special edition of *The Nation* in 1990. From 1988 through roughly 1993, Portland, Oregon was a center, if not the center, of racist skinhead organizing in the United States. It was difficult for those outside of the city - just as it is for people in Portland now - to conceive just how many boneheads there were and why they were such a threat to the nascent gay and lesbian community, the progressive and radical community, the communities of color and the punk scene that were all part of Portland.

Thirteen-year-old kids would go to all ages shows at the Satryicon and come away muttering, "Maybe this punk rock is not for me," when crews of shaved-head, Doc Marten'd people would clear out the mosh pits. There were daytime attacks on people of color in Pioneer Courthouse Square and 'hippies' along Hawthorne Avenue by small gangs of nazi punks. Weekend beer bashes with scores of boneheads were a common event, with physical attacks and racist graffiti sprees a common aftermath. Here is the police report on what they removed from one carload of boneheads (who were out hunting for a group of us): .45 caliber pistol, .357 Magnum revolver, 12- gauge pump shotgun, .22 caliber rifle. Spare clips for all. 3 knives, one baseball bat. That car had four nazi punks.

Langer captured the potential threat of that emerging movement and subculture in the special issue of *The Nation*. It was used by the Coalition for Human Dignity (which she correctly

identifies as the main grass-roots organization opposing the neo-fascists in Portland) both as an educational tool and as a means of raising funds. Kids who knew they hated the local gang of white youths, who were usually just bullies learning to do racist graffiti, learned about the long and inglorious history of fascism. Older antiracists who were familiar with the Klan and similar organizations learned that the new face of fascism would not be caught dead or alive in a pointy-headed sheet.

The second thanks are for her new book. *One Hundred Little Hitlers* is not written as an organizing manual. But merely (!) telling the truth is always revolutionary. Again and again, Langer digs up the story from the participants and lets them tell what actually happened.

What results is a history that many people don't like: Tom Metzger, who rightfully occupies center stage in her book, may have been convicted in trial and Ken Mieske, who killed Mulegeta Seraw, may be rotting in OSP, but white supremacy and the neo-fascist movement were untouched by the legal machinations. Langer makes her points time and again: The boneheads didn't come from Germany or even southern California. They were not stupid or cowardly. The arrests and trial in Portland, which she correctly views as more akin to a morality play, did nothing to slow them as a political movement. The Southern Poverty Law Center and Morris Dees, who have pimped off the death of Mulugeta Seraw for fifteen years, should feel a little shamed by Langer's work. The neo-liberal political establishment of Portland, which was working overtime to portray Portland as a safe place for Asian capital and visitors, has to be uncomfortable with the evidence she amasses to show that a deep-seated racist past, not a few California agitators, were behind the continuing attacks on people of color in Portland.

### III

Another book remains to be written. So let us return to the audience and ask them for the history of how the neo-nazis were driven out of Portland.

Let's start at the beginning, right after Mulugeta Seraw's death in 1988. The first rally to protest the death of Seraw was called by African students in Portland a few days later, in spite of opposition by the police and neo-liberal politicians (and some progressive groups).

When hundreds of people showed up, the governor of Oregon, Neil Goldschmidt, asked to speak. The rally organizers, who did not even know who he was, allowed him to talk. So began a continuing effort to coopt the grass-roots movement against neo-fascists, while attacking those who carried out militant actions.

The Coalition for Human Dignity initially met in the same chambers used by the Portland City Council. The community activists and college kids who composed its members spent much of 1989 vacillating between calling rallies, attempting to get city and union resolutions passed and taking direct action.

The decision was finally made to attack the boneheads where they lived, worked and played. While the Oregonian and neo-liberal politicians made speeches against "hate", the remaining members of CHD, along with the new groups Anti-Racist Action and Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice decided to destroy the fascist groups in town. This meant that they were to be confronted when they appeared publicly but, more importantly, they would be attacked in ways that they were not prepared for.

ARA, SHARP and members of the punk music community, including members of CHD, began to drive the boneheads out of the clubs and the culture. Bands that had huge local followings, such as Poison Idea or Sweaty Nipples, stopped concerts to speak against

boneheads and vowed not to play if they congregated at their shows. Some bands changed their names, such as Wehrmacht or took on confrontational anti-racist names, such as Crackerbash.

Security at most of the clubs began refusing to let open boneheads into the clubs - which led to tense scenes such as the 1991 Fugazi show at Pine Street Theater when a hundred boneheads, male and female, showed up and threatened to burn it down if they were not let in. They didn't get in. Individual ARA or SHARP members would confront boneheads outside of clubs, as when a fifteen-year-old Vietnamese punk girl in ARA blasted four boneheads in the face with Mace.

Punk poster artists who had made Portland famous turned their talents to anti-fascist art. We ousted the nazis from their jobs. When reliable reports would emerge about boneheads who were leading attacks at clubs, members of the CHD would do research. If he had a job at the Olive Garden, 50- 100 activists from CHD, ARA, SHARP, the Lesbian Community Project, Black United Front, ACT-UP and other organizations would show up unexpectedly at his workplace. Flyers featuring his photo and a description of his attacks and his organizational beliefs would go into the hands of his co-workers and anyone going to eat.

We would meet with the manager of the business, let them know what was going to happen, notify the local media and wait for the inevitable.

It may have been a shit job, but in every case where we placed a picket, the bonehead lost the shit job, usually that day and usually because his co-workers refused to work while he was there.

We evicted them from our communities. The inner and outer Southeast were pockmarked with known bonehead houses. After the Coalition for Human Dignity became known for going after the boneheads (and, it should be noted, CHD had a phone number, unlike SHARP or ARA. One of the measures we used to gauge success was how many death threats were made to it on a weekly basis) a number of the neighborhood associations began contacting us, rather than the police.

Most boneheads rented. Dozens lost their crash pads when a picket line composed of anti-racist activists and neighborhood residents showed up at their front door, while a few CHD members and neighborhood association people met with their landlords. Since nazi punks had a predilection for loud parties, spraypainting on their walls and threatening their neighbors, most landlords were happy to move them out.

We defended our community. A number of individuals who had been attacked by nazi thugs told the Coalition that the police blew off their requests for protection. These ranged from an elderly woman who had sheltered kids hiding from nazi punks to members of SHARP whose apartment was attacked. Armed volunteers slept overnight, sometimes for weeks-long stretches, at houses that neo-nazi gangs had attacked.

From those volunteers, many of which went on to train in martial arts, there also emerged a group of people who carried out defensive strikes on the houses and vehicles of boneheads who had attacked people.

Bob Heck, who had moved to Portland from the Bay Area with the stated delusion of launching the American Front as the 'foremost U.S. neo-nazi organization', asked for police protection from unknown individuals. He complained to the media that he could not sleep safely in his home after it was hit three times. These attacks were not always coordinated or well thought out. Members

of SHARP were jailed and imprisoned for attacks in which boneheads were severely injured and/or killed.

The political attack against the neo-nazis occurred despite a COINTELPRO operation against the anti-racist activists, with the FBI and Portland police meeting regularly (a dozen years before the current Portland Joint Terrorism Task Force).

As Langer notes in her book, the centerpiece of a "Dignity and Diversity" week before the trial of the Metzgers in October, 1990, was a march and rally in Portland. 5,000 people marched from the site of Seraw's murder to a rally near Portland State University, where John Trudell, Hitting Birth and other acts performed.

What Langer does not note is that Portland police made repeated attempts to stop or disrupt the organizing, which was a joint effort by the Lesbian Community Project, ARA, SHARP, CHD and over 30 other community groups. Besides getting PSU to pull the park permit which had already been granted and threatening to revoke the parade permit, the police planted stories in the local media about car bombs along the parade route.

Organizers stated that the march and rally would occur as scheduled, permits or no permits.

The event went forward, though surrounded by massive police presence. When local politicians counted heads and showed up to go to the front of the event, they were escorted back. None were allowed to speak at the rally.

Drawing heavily from the FBI and police sources, the Oregonian at one point ran 13 straight stories about SHARP, calling them a 'gang' without ever interviewing a member. One such planted story declared that the police had broken up a Laurelhurst park neo-fascist rally on Hitler's birthday, when in fact it had been an anti-racist picnic with a contingent of Asian and Native American folks present.

Local TV media were no better. At another critical point, after the murder of a bonehead, Bomber Dave, TV stations broadcast interviews with both the police and local neo-nazis that blamed SHARP. It was eventually revealed that two women and two men from his own bonehead crew had kicked him to death.

## IV

Why is it important to know this history?

Here is a headline: "Racist gang leader sentenced to 3 years in hate crime series."

Those sentences were not written in 1989 or 1992. That was the Oregonian on December 9, 2003. A November Tribune headline noted that a neo-fascist group attacked a Black man and someone that they thought was a SHARP member. An Indy Media Portland post asks what to do about nazi punks at shows.

The boneheads are still here, albeit in smaller and less public formations. No neo-fascist group has dared to call a public gathering in or near Portland in a decade.

But the conditions that led to the emergence of the Boot Boys and East Side White Pride (two local bonehead groups) and WAR (Metzger's national organization) still exist. If anything, as Langer points out, those who consider themselves part of such a movement would number in the hundreds of thousands, not the ten thousand that was estimated in 1990.

It is important to remember that those who drove the boneheads out of Portland were, for the most part, young people in their late teens and early twenties.

It is important to understand that it was the decision to destroy the groups and to do so regardless of what the cops, the media and the city were doing, rather than any one tactic or event that gained the successes that occurred.

It is crucial to realize that both the nazis and the state have learned from what happened here and are unlikely to repeat their mistakes again.

I have not used the names of any of the people who were crucial to the destruction of neo-nazi groups in Portland. While they are scattered from Brazil to Boston, some of them still have their names posted on neo-fascist bulletin boards. Let me honor only one: Kirk Douglas, Native American, out gay man, anti-nazi activist. Died of AIDS in 1990.

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