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Historical Writing 3008

### For Country or Homeland: The Challenge for German Americans During World War I

World War I is one of many scars on the face of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The destruction the War brought to all countries, even in those where physical land was not harmed like the U.S.A, is seen through the number of casualties. Germany, France, and Russia, for example, were destroyed in areas where major battles occurred. Aerial maps of these places show the complete destruction of buildings, houses, and bridges by German advances to control entire cities for their cause. Amid all-out chaos in Europe, however, life in America during the war seemed like an alternate reality. Americans were aware of the War going on overseas but continued with their normal lives. Despite the U.S. not formally entering the War until 1917, home-front campaigns for the war were never the less well underway across the country.

The distance from the war was not the same for German Americans living in the United States during the War. Germans living in the country during the war faced a harsh decision: what side would they take? Would they abandon their family's homeland to side with America, or stay true to their roots? Increased government propaganda about the war made life for German Americans even harder. Campaigns between Hollywood and government agencies like the Treasury ramped up calls for supporting the war through promotions for food banks, enlistment drives, and reminding people that real Americans support war efforts. Theaters would hang posters to remind their customers that the theater supported war efforts as well as running ads for the war effort before all movies. The film industry was not the only one to promote war

propaganda. People across the country who bought into heightened nationalistic tendencies began to question German American loyalty. In a precursor to McCarthyism, German Americans across the country faced scrutiny in the workplace if they showed signs of laziness or underproduction. This was enough to justify job loss for these people, pure suspicion, and speculation. The workplace was not the only area German Americans faced scrutiny, though. Schools, churches, and newspapers that were using German as their main languages also faced calls for closure and faced threats of violence from nationalistic mobs. These tendencies reached into the House of Representatives, with German-born members of Congress having to defend their heritage and repeatedly reaffirm their loyalty to the country. No aspect of German culture was safe from the increased calls for forced loyalty and support of the war effort.

Large amounts of literature and research are available on immigrants living in the United States during wartime as well as the struggle of dealing with heightened nationalistic tendencies. The bulk of literature focuses on groups like the Japanese during World War II, anti-Vietnam War protestors of the 1960s, and even Germans during World War II, but there has been less written on the First World War immigrants living in America. The sources of research on this topic come from newspaper articles from the period, books like *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I*, by Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, and *Natives and Strangers: A Multicultural History of Americans* by Leonard Dinnerstein. Articles such as Paul Willi Adams' "Ethnic Politicians and American Nationalism during the First World War: Four German-Born Members of the House of Representatives" and Patricia Michaelis' "Crisis of Loyalty: Examples of Anti-German Sentiment from Kansas Memory" portray the circumstances of Germans living in America during World War I, and the choices they had to make to maintain their normal lives.

To understand the situation of German Americans, some background of their experience in the country before and during World War I is needed. In 1910, an estimated 2.3 million German-born Americans were living in the country, down from 2.8 million in 1890.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the war, there were even 4 German-born members of the House of Representatives.<sup>2</sup> During the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most immigrant groups that came to America faced discrimination or persecution in one form or another. The most common factors determining a group's fate were their religion, skin color, and perceived ability to assimilate into American society. For these reasons, groups from Asia and Latin America faced harder times entering the country compared to most of the groups that came from Europe.<sup>3</sup> However, not every group coming from Europe escaped hatred from Americans. German immigrants faced an easier time considering most coming to America were white, Protestant in belief, and could assimilate easier since German people had been coming to America for decades before. Like most groups, formation of ethnic community centers allowed for groups to have the ease of their own culture at hand while they learned aspects of American life. This easier process of assimilation allowed for settlements like that in the Big Cypress area north of Houston, Texas, to thrive for decades.

Texas alone had a population of German-born Americans of around 45,000.<sup>4</sup> The Houston area was home to a large portion of this population, the largest concentration being the communities of Klein, Spring, and Cypress. The Germans living here embraced all aspects of their own culture and infused them within their communities. Festivals like Maifest and

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<sup>1</sup> "The Germans in America," Chronology: The Germans in America (European Reading Room, Library of Congress), <https://www.loc.gov/rr/european/imde/germchro.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Willi Paul Adams, "Ethnic Politicians and American Nationalism during the First World War: Four German-born Members of the House of Representatives" *American Studies International* 29, no. 1 (April 1991)

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, Roger L. Nichols, and David M. Reimers, *Natives and Strangers: A Multicultural History of Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233.

<sup>4</sup> Jared Donnelly, "Big Cypress German-Americans During World War I," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 45 (2010): 130.

Oktoberfest were common practice, along with most of the newspapers and church services being held in German, not English.<sup>5</sup> The commonality of German culture made life easier for newer immigrants who had not learned English. German was the preferred language for most in this area, and only added to the attention that this community received during wartime. The discovery of oil in 1904, just east in Humble, attracted more people from the homeland with notes like, "...*Geh mit ins Texas* ("go with us to Texas")" circulating around Germany.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of industry into the German parts of Texas made this area known to the rest of the country. The Houston and Galveston areas were growing into an area of importance for oil and transportation of goods, and this brought higher expectations of loyalty following the United States' entry into World War I.

The region of Lincoln, Nebraska, is another example of booming German communities before the war. The area had 200,000 people of German heritage or birth in 1910 and 40 newspapers printed completely in German.<sup>7</sup> Growth was so rapid that the state passed laws requiring these papers to also have stories about state or local government events. The University of Nebraska flourished with culture clubs and conferences of German professors to give their views on the ongoing war in their homeland. Banks like Lincoln's German-American Bank, and Charles Dietrich's German National Bank flourished with the large populations of German-born residents.<sup>8</sup> Even towns were named after German cities, such as Berlin, Nebraska. Like their fellow Germans in Texas, the population in Nebraska was in support of President Wilson's

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<sup>5</sup> Jared Donnelly, "Big Cypress German-Americans During World War I," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 45 (2010): 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*;131.

<sup>7</sup> Jim McKee, "Entry into WWI Caused Anti-German Sentiment," *Lincoln Journal Star*, June 28, 2010, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*; 2.

policy of neutrality towards the war during the early years. They did not want to be forced into combat against not only their own people but possibly family members.

Support for continued neutrality reached even those members of the House of Representatives who had German heritage. Richard Bartholdt of Missouri was the leading figure of the four members of the House. His stance on neutrality went beyond the idea of just staying out of physical fighting. His goal was a complete embargo of goods to England from American merchants. He would join fellow German Democrat Henry Vollmer in December 1914 in introducing such a bill but, unsurprisingly it failed to reach the House floor for debate.<sup>9</sup> The definition of neutrality is not taking a side in a conflict or issue, and America did just this. While the United States sold arms and supplies to England and France, it also sold supplies to Germany and Austria. Thus, Bartholdt was slightly misguided in his goal of “genuine neutrality,” and a logical reason for his stance was more pro-German and anti-England. Given England’s reliance on American munitions and supplies, an embargo Bartholdt envisioned would have crippled the English war effort and made German chances for victory greater. As we have seen, there were two sides to the neutrality support from German Americans. Ordinary people from Nebraska or Texas supported it out of fear of fighting their own people. The case from House members like Richard Bartholdt were more anti-English, since he saw them as spreading “outrageous prevarications of the truth and cruel misrepresentations of Germany, and her people.”<sup>10</sup>

As most German Americans feared, the United States eventually entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1917. The millions of German Americans now saw their position in the country challenged, and they faced a crisis. Now, they needed to prove their loyalty to America

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<sup>9</sup> Willi Paul Adams, "Ethnic Politicians and American Nationalism during the First World War: Four German-born Members of the House of Representatives" *American Studies International* 29, no. 1 (April 1991)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, unenumerated

or face even harsher levels of persecution from Americans, whose suspicion of anything German-related had increased. The areas of society that faced the hardest criticism were German newspapers, churches, and the language itself. The same areas that defined these German pockets of the country were now under attack from “super patriotism.”<sup>11</sup> This hyper nationalism targeted all aspects of German life in America but had a particular focus on the teaching of German in schools across the country. This crusade against German schools and education was based on the premise that the schools were fueling the belief of Germans using their communities to increase anti-America sentiment. One of the many war propaganda posters of the time depicted Germany as being a savage brute coming to America with its concept of “Kultur” to destroy the American way of life and replace it with the German language and culture. The effects of the war against German schooling were felt throughout Indianapolis since its history of offering German language to all grade levels dated back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and German was taught in 38 elementary schools as well as the two high schools in the city.<sup>12</sup> Upon entrance to the war, schools in the state of Indiana fell in line with the notion to increase their patriotic behavior and tendencies, and this meant cracking down on all things German. Throughout the war years, increased societal pressures mounted across the state against these German language programs, and in 1918 Indianapolis’s largest German newspaper, *Telegraph und Tribüne*, stopped issuing publications due to threats from the community.<sup>13</sup> The height of anti-German sentiment reached its peak with the passage of a bill in the state legislature mandating English be the only lawful language allowed in any level of school across the state. The law stated that any person found in

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<sup>11</sup> Lavern J. Rippley, "Wisconsin German-Americans and World War I: Wisconsin, "The German-American Homefront," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 50 (January 2015): 285.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 292.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 296.

violation could face up to six months in prison and/or pay a fine of \$100.<sup>14</sup> It was not just Indianapolis that faced growing threats to cease their German language programs, however. The hysteria of nationalism spread to the University of Michigan, where German professors were likewise coming under fire.

Michigan, like most Midwest states, had a large German population, and the language was just as common in some parts as English was. What makes this university the best example of anti-German sentiment is the dismissal of the entire body of German professors and faculty from the university. Between October 1917 and March 1918, half of the staff of the German department was fired or let go from the university.<sup>15</sup> Reasons for the dismissal of professors ranged from unpatriotic behavior and pro-German speech to treason against the country. The core of American education was completely uprooted and tossed out for more than 2 million Americans based on suspicion of threats against the country during a time of war. The threats did not stop with just the use of German in schools, however they also spread to churches and newspapers published in only German.

These institutions faced the same course of action. They were met with calls from the public to cease the use of the German language, for it was perceived as spreading pro-German propaganda. People's lack of understanding of the German language gave them the belief that what was being said was pro-German propaganda and must be put to an end for the safety of the country. The use of German in church services was a common practice for most of these communities. Most of the German churches in America were Lutheran in faith, and the established language of the religion was German. At the start of the war, most churches from

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid 299.

<sup>15</sup> Clifford Wilcox, "World War I and the Attack on Professors of German at the University of Michigan.," *History of Education Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (February 1993): 62.

smaller cities and towns faced little backlash for using German, and preachers used their weekly sermon to promote peace for the German homeland and its people. Even so, few church preachers used their position to blame the onset of the war on England and twisted interpretations from the American media. Reverend Philip Kirchner of St. John's German Lutheran Church in Reading Pennsylvania, invited anti-German sentiment when he proclaimed that "ours is a German church, where the Word of God is read and preached, and our prayers are spoken in the German language."<sup>16</sup> He continued by saying that America betrayed its neutrality by carrying reports on the war only from countries like England or France and not Germany or its allies. While the war brought on these criticisms itself, some communities harbored pro-German sentiment, and thus faced increased backlash from the American public. Most large cities with German populations faced immediate backlash for their use of the language in their sermons. For most churches, the common practice was to switch from German to English for services, but these threats only strengthened the unity of German communities across the country to continue the use of their own language and other cultural aspects.

Despite this perceived threat, the main force for propaganda came from American newspaper and media outlets. The role of the film industry in spreading war propaganda was larger than any perceived threat coming from the use of German in public places. With the advancements in video technology, the popularity of movie theaters increased across the country. Once involved in the war, the government began to utilize movie theaters to spread their pro-war, anti-German propaganda efforts. The National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI) was the source of the United States government's propaganda campaign.<sup>17</sup> NAMPI

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<sup>16</sup> Karen Guenther, "A Question of Loyalty: German Churches in Reading during the First World War.," *Pennsylvania History* 84, no. 3 (2017), 328.

<sup>17</sup> Leslie Midkiff. DeBauche, "The Film Industry and Government Propaganda on the Homefront," in *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 105.

was a collection of top movie directors and produces. Their original goals were not concerned with aiding the government, but rather to act as a central governing body for all areas of the film industry. However, President Wilson signed Executive Order 2594 in 1917, creating the Committee on Public Information.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of this Executive Order was to create an organized public campaign to increase public awareness and support for the war effort. The campaign took the form of posters for areas of military service in theater lobbies, pre-movie short films from government agencies like the Treasury Department and Food Administration and calls for people to join bond drives to help raise money for the war effort. The theater lobby was the center for most propaganda, and one example is a certificate from the U.S. Food Administration depicting the logo of the agency followed by the text stating that the theater was a certified member and supporter of the U.S. Food Administration. All movies were subject to these advertisements, regardless of whether their contents had no connection to the war. These short films and advertisements did not focus only on home front support. Being the center of the Axis powers, Germany was a top target of them as well.

These attacks on Germany portrayed the country as the destroyer of freedom and democracy. Accuracy was not a top priority for the government, since their main goal was to instill fear in the public to increase support for the war. These campaigns to vilify Germany as the threat to America only increased the high levels of animosity towards Germans living in the country. These campaigns only added to the pressures Germans faced in the media, schooling, and religion. Now, they faced increased threats from people who were exposed to constant films and fliers that portrayed their people as savages out to destroy America. The circumstance came

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<sup>18</sup> Leslie Midkiff. DeBauche, "The Film Industry and Government Propaganda on the Homefront," in *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 107.

down to German Americans being forced to support a war effort against their own country by a government that was instilling hatred against them into society.

The suspicion that steamed from this propaganda campaign came in various forms. It ranged from loss of jobs, businesses, or social standing. In some cases, no proof of conspiring against the country was required for German Americans to lose their possessions. Just like Nebraska and Texas, Kansas, too, had large German communities that dated back centuries before World War I. One key difference about Kansas was a higher rate of violence against Germans. In counties like Ellis, Russel, Barton, and Marion, the percentage of Germans reached almost 3% of the total 1.5 million people living there.<sup>19</sup> Those suspected of being disloyal were given the term “slacker” so that others knew whom to target. One example is the story of Phil Crab of Ada, Kansas. Crab received a letter from the Red Cross asking for a donation of \$2 but he refused to do so. When his refusal was made public, the community began to threaten him for disloyal behavior, and retaliated by threatening to paint his house yellow to let everyone know of his actions. His case reached the governor’s office, whose response was anything but sympathetic. Governor Arthur Capper’s response reflected the tone of the country in that Mr. Crab should mimic an American trend “men of small means, girls working on meagre salaries, are sacrificing pleasures, comforts, and often-times actual necessities in order to help the government.”<sup>20</sup> This tone was reflected in the hundreds of letters Governor Capper sent out regarding cases of people being accused of slacker behavior.

These letters were not the only obstacles German Americans faced during wartime, however. In 1917, a presidential proclamation laid out zones that were prohibited for “enemy

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<sup>19</sup> Patricia Michaelis, "Crisis of Loyalty: Examples of Anti-German Sentiment from Kansas Memory.," *Kansas History* 40, no. 1 (2017): 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 24.

aliens” to travel through.<sup>21</sup> This proclamation applied to all non-naturalized citizens and required them to have additional permits to access certain parts of towns and cities. Like Jewish Germans in Nazi Germany, these people could be stopped by authorities at any time and asked to hand over their documents for authentication. Those caught without proper documentation faced “possible imprisonment until the end of the war.”<sup>22</sup> Laws like these brought on waves of newspaper articles and headlines asking if people were with the country or with the Germans, and those only added to the intense fever of anti-German sentiment across Kansas and the country. Most of the action taken against German Americans in Kansas focused on instilling fear and forcing cooperation with the war effort. While most people who fell victim to these threats were ordinary people, the movement reached levels of the state government with members of banks or other agencies being forced out because of their heritage.

Living in a country at the height of a war like World War I is hard for all people. For the U.S., the physical scars of the war were not felt at home, but the societal and emotional effects were felt throughout the country. Families had to grapple with wondering if their sons, husbands, or fathers were even going to return from Europe alive and in a stable mental capacity. Constant reminders from movie theaters, newspapers, and government propaganda campaigns reminded people every day of the sacrifices they had to make to ensure the savage threat of Germany never made its way to the homeland. From these messages, public campaigns began to arise across the country to make sure everyone person did their share to support the war, and punish those who did not. The main target of these public campaigns was Americans of German heritage. In the cases examined, it did not matter how long or prominent a person of German heritage was in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 26.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Michaelis, "Crisis of Loyalty: Examples of Anti-German Sentiment from Kansas Memory," *Kansas History* 40, no. 1 (2017): 26.

their communities. Heightened senses of nationalism and pride forced these people to change the way they lived their daily lives. Their language was forced out of schools, newspapers, and church services based on claims it was spreading pro-German propaganda. Entire communities and towns built on German culture were assaulted for fear of plotting against the country, and some states went as far to outright ban the use of the language in public. The state of Kansas took this anti-German hysteria to new levels by restricting access of non-naturalized people to certain parts of towns and cities and backed these claims up by saying it was to protect the nation. The challenge of German Americans during World War I was a struggle of loyalty to their new country or their homeland. Whether they had just arrived in the country, or been living in the U.S. for decades, they had to go above and beyond normal standards to show their loyalty and be spared from having their livelihood destroyed by the fever of nationalism.

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