

March 2013

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Recommended Citation

Holmes, Taylor (2013) "Deutschland Unsere Mutter, Columbia Our Bride: German-America in the Progressive Era," *Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at The University of Tennessee*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/pur42zziw>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit/vol4/iss2/6>

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Deutschland Unsere Mutter, Columbia Our Bride: German-America in the Progressive Era

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In many histories of American involvement in the First World War, the anti-German hysteria that exploded in the United States is often trivially attributed to the reality that America had declared war on Germany and the consequent propaganda the war effort generated. This, however, overlooks the significant presence of anti-German sentiment prior both to the outbreak of the First World War and American entry into the war. Precedent to and coincident with U.S. military intervention in Europe was the domestic cultural struggle between an ascendant and dominantly Anglo-American Progressive ideology and a cultural pluralism that German-American ethnic pride embodied. The First World War provoked these latent tensions into active violence. Through the use of secondary sources, this study analyzes the underlying motivations of anti-German prejudice and the driving ideologies behind Anglo-American cultural chauvinists and German-American ethnic pride. The waning of German ethnic institutions in America is likewise examined, as is the growth and decline of the National German-American Alliance. This study is not only a contribution to the relatively small amount of research completed on the history of German-American communities, but is also an addition to the histories of the Progressive Era as it analyzes the goal of Progressive ideology to produce conformity to a homogeneous "American" culture and its resulting manifestations of racism and prejudice.

The German-Americans once boasted of being the single largest non-English speaking ethnic demographic, with over five million immigrants arriving in the United States from 1850-1900.¹ Complementary to this was the prominence of German culture in America and the proliferation of favorable German stereotypes in the popular mindset. Germans were considered industrious and civic-minded, if somewhat divisive and argumentative in their personal opinions. Today, Germany is often associated with Prussian militarism, illiberalism, and the tyranny of the Nazi regime. So what had happened? It could not be the

simple fact that America had fought two major wars with Germany; America had fought two major wars against Great Britain, and the dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture is readily apparent to the present day. The erosion of German Kultur must be attributed to the ascendant progressivism, heavily-influenced by Anglo-American culture, which occurred before the turn of the 20th century and the dominance of its ideology during the first two decades of that century. The waning of German ethnic institutions in the face of a dominant Anglo-American culture in the late 19th century and the outbreak of a general European war involving Germany and England in the 20th century precipitated among some German-Americans a resurgent pride in Kultur and a commitment to cultural pluralism; this pluralism, becoming a perceived threat to the national loyalty and patriotism demanded by the First World War, in turn provoked a nativist progressive backlash which institutionalized methods of alienation and suppression against German-Americans.

German immigration witnessed a remarkable upsurge in the late 19th century. In one eleven-year period from 1881 to 1892, nearly two million Germans immigrated to the United States to escape the political and economic hardships of a newly united German Empire.² This upsurge, however, was followed by an equally severe decline, with only half a million German immigrants over the next twenty-year period.³ This means that by 1900, the second-generation of the ethnically German population far outnumbered the first.⁴ Significantly, those of the first-generation which had lived through German Unification possessed a tendency to view the Imperial government in a more favorable light and to be more vocal about their ethnic identity as Germans.⁵ Concentrated pockets of this first-generation, more sensitive and less receptive to processes of assimilation than those of the second-generation, thus believed they had been given the task of preserving "Deutschtum" in America and maintaining the meaningfulness of German ethnic traditions for coming generations of German-Americans. Their efforts not only promoted pride in German heritage, but they also enabled the American public to conceive of the German-American community as a homogenous whole, often ignoring the deep socio-political and religious divisions that existed therein.⁶

The labeling of this group becomes a sensitive issue, not least of all because this group lacks cohesiveness in all characteristics outside their purposes of Germany ethnic unity. They, in addition, were not representative of the German-American community at large. They did, however, encourage Anglo-Americans to view them as such, and it is here that the purpose of identifying causes of German-American persecution lies. As they were viewed as subversives by contemporaries, their title will inevitably seem contextually pejorative: Germanists.

The Germanists, like other German-American communities, utilized several defenses against the forces of Americanization, including the German language, education in German, and the German-language press.⁷ These defenses came under direct attack after American entry into the First World War.

Chief among these in the promotion of an image of German-American unity was the German-language press. At the height of German immigration in 1890, there were nearly 800 German-language newspapers and journals published in the United States.⁸ Within ten years, however, that number would suffer a severe decline due to the decrease of German-American readership, which had begun to turn towards English-language publications.⁹ In an effort to retain readership, these publications made a marked shift from the promotion of Americanization to the promotion of a self-conscious ethnic identity: German-American.¹⁰ Frederick Luebke points out that this apparent cohesion had little basis in fact, and that

an “an appearance of institutional health” concealed real, extensive divisions within the community.¹¹ Such an observation, however, would have been difficult to make outside the community, and so many Americans considered the German-language press as being representative of a highly cohesive ethnic group.

Before the First World War began, Germans in America gave highest praise to all things German and were insistent on the German influence in the formation of American national character; such a struggle for the legitimacy and security of German-American status within American society represents a deeper struggle for Germans as such to be conceived of in specifically American ways.¹² German-American intellectual societies were founded to commemorate and highlight German-American contributions to the history of the nation, and this was but one of the many ways that German ethnic pride sought to defend its place against a narrowing conception of Americanism.¹³ It was a German pride that claimed an American heritage, and its trajectories would inevitably come into conflict with the contrary and much more popular notion of America as being Anglo-Saxon in its national character. In the eyes of German-Americans such a conflict was not a significant issue. They believed that the cultural synthesis of all cultural strains were what created American society; not the simple domination of one cultural heritage.¹⁴ This concept is often called cultural pluralism. Framing this notion was the idea that an American citizen had the right to cultivate their ethnic heritage while maintaining total political loyalty to the United States. In respect to German-Americans, this was often expressed with the aphorism, “Germania our mother; Columbia our bride.”¹⁵ What the German-Americans accomplished was the creation of an ethnic identity that was both German and American. This implies more than the preservation of cultural heritage; it justifies the persistence of ethnic difference in the fabric of American society.¹⁶ German-Americans, while conceiving themselves as wholly American, were also wholly different and separate from other categories of Americans, and the ethnic category that the German-Americans would come into most conflict with was the dominant Anglo-American.

The Anglo-Americans of the Progressive Era were, naturally, the proselytizers of the dominant ideology that became the period’s namesake. Focused on the legislation of social mores and active reform of community values with an aim to eliminate social ills, the progressives fought for prohibition, and Sabbatarianism; German-Americans, however, saw their cousins as invading their personal liberties and imposing their values upon items often held to be culturally sacred traditions.¹⁷ But Anglo-Americans were insistent in the belief that they knew what the future of society could and ought to look like, and, when they thought about it, it looked a lot like themselves. Americans of English origin had always been numerically dominant, so Anglo-Americans freely indulged in a cultural chauvinism that demanded conformity to their standards.¹⁸ The implications were that their definition of “America” was the correct one, and that social and cultural homogeneity among all so-called Americans was highly desirable.¹⁹ This demand for Anglo-conformity manifested itself in a number of progressivist initiatives. One of these was the maintenance of a “racially-pure” American stock through the promotion of restrictive immigration acts.²⁰ Another was the legislative effort to mandate compulsory education in English-language schools, thus undercutting foreign-language institutions and teaching “American” civic life.²¹ Last but certainly not least, there was the issue of prohibition.

The continued agitation of Anglo-Americans for issues such as immigration restriction was met in every way by equally militant ethnic responses by those who felt these initiatives infringed unduly on their personal freedoms and cultures, but it was the national

character of the prohibition movement that finally provoked the formation of national ethno-political organizations.²² The crown jewel of these organizations was the National German-American Alliance.

Threatened by the decline of German immigration, the erosion of German ethnic institutions that decline precipitated, and the nativistic progressive pressures to assimilate into an American national community based on Anglo-American values, the Germanists sought to preserve their culture and traditions by organizing nationally.²³ Thus, the National German-American Alliance was born. Founded by Charles J. Hexamer in Philadelphia, 1901, the NGAA stated in its constitution's preamble:

"The German-American Alliance aims to awaken and strengthen the sense of unity among the people of German origin in America with a view to promote ... the power inherent in them as a united body for the mutual energetic protection of such legitimate desires and interests not inconsistent with the common good of the country...; to check nativistic encroachments; to maintain and safeguard the good friendly relations existing between America and the old German fatherland."²⁴

There were a number of measures that the NGAA proposed in its stated initiative of German cultural preservation, and it is not surprising that these measures directly contradict those proposed by the nativistic progressives. They included the recommendation of German-language instruction in public schools; the creation of educational societies, such as The German-American Historical Society, to teach German culture; the calling upon of all Germans in America to acquire citizenship and the advocacy of political activity to protect their liberties; the removal of unnecessary restrictions on immigration to the United States; and the opposition to restrictions on personal liberties including the prohibition of alcohol.²⁵

The NGAA received a national charter from Congress in 1906 and by 1909 their membership claimed more than two million, making them a formidable player in national politics.²⁶ They achieved national recognition, which would place them inevitably under national scrutiny. Against the forces of assimilation, the erosion of German cultural pride, and the siege on cultural pluralism by the nativist progressives the NGAA fought for years with variable success. It would be grossly inaccurate to claim, based on their focus on domestic policies, that the NGAA were not concerned with foreign relations; the final aim of their constitution proves otherwise. They knew something was on the horizon even in 1901. No one knew what that event might be, but German-Americans, despite their divisions, were of one mind on one thing: they hoped it would not be war.

With the eruption of the First World War in Europe, both the efforts of the Germanists to defend their ethnic culture against encroachments and the image of a united German-American community could only place a greater strain on the tolerance of these divergent attitudes by dominant society.

German-Americans were inspired by the war to feel an emotional and cultural connection to their fatherland and this connection often manifested itself, especially in the concentrated German-American communities of St. Louis and other cities in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic, in mass demonstrations of German pride and fund-raisers for the German and Austro-Hungarian people.²⁷ These demonstrations became a powerful indicator of German-American ethnic unity, and the NGAA was a major contributor to organizing the fund-raisers through the activity of its state chapters.²⁸ At one charity event held by German Philadelphia in 1916, the bazaar's president, Josef Schlenz, hailed the event as

an achievement of “a united Germandom,” and the press commented on how the German-American community had lain aside “all religious and political prejudices in an effort to make the affair one of national pride.”²⁹ Fund-raising events for war relief such as these occurred across the country in St. Louis, Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and other cities.³⁰ The collection of money, more often than not, went towards relief for the wounded, the orphaned, the widowed, and the beleaguered populations suffering from British naval blockades and the German Red Cross; not towards the government.³¹ The support for Germany given by these German-Americans in the United States at the outbreak of war had less to do with political allegiance to their fatherland than it had to do with the safeguarding of German culture and the status of Germans in the American social milieu.³²

The German-language newspapers continued to contribute to the image of a unified German-America in their consensus on several issues: the impartiality of a pro-British press, alleged German atrocities, sale of war material to Allied powers, and loans to the British and French governments.³³ Allied war dispatches, especially those considering the German invasion of neutral Belgium, functioned to emphasize the Anglo-Saxon character of American life by characterizing German culture as base and brutal.³⁴ The German-language press, who had everything to gain from taking a pro-German line, fought against these depictions; they accepted uncritically the explanation that the war had been forced upon Germany, and concurred in the German military’s prediction of a quick victory.³⁵ Such publications, as was expected, were not popular with the majority of Americans, who sided with Great Britain and France. The German-Americans were criticized for backing an autocratic regime. One German-American run English-language newspaper in particular, *The Fatherland*, contributed significantly to the image of German-Americans as “arrogant partisans of the Kaiser’s government” through its defense of Germany, its criticism of the Allies, and its call to action for second-generation German-Americans.³⁶ A correspondent for *The Fatherland* even spoke before the Prussian Diet in 1914, claiming that Germany could count on the NGAA to shape American opinion on the war in Germany’s favor as it was the largest German organization outside of the fatherland.³⁷

The efforts of the Germanists to foster German ethnic pride were, to a significant degree, successful. German-language publications increased circulation and membership in German societies swelled.³⁸ The German-American community was apparently gaining in cohesiveness but, at the same time, definitions of American nationality were narrowing.³⁹ Slogans like “Be an American first” became common.⁴⁰ The German-Americans certainly considered themselves Americans first and Germans second, but they failed to grasp the unspoken message of the slogan: Be an American *only*.

Spurred on by the exceptional grade of ethnic unity, the NGAA moved to shape American foreign policy in order to avert war with Germany; in so doing they were especially critical of President Wilson’s purportedly neutral policies.⁴¹ Wilson’s policies were criticized for his seizure of two German-American short-wave radio stations during the second week of the war, the only means of receiving German war reports since the British had cut the German Trans-Atlantic cable to America during the first week, and for his allowance of Allied blockades on trade to European nations.⁴² He also accepted a delegation from Belgium, a belligerent nation in the war, while simultaneously refusing to admit a German-American delegation.⁴³ The Germanists were also critical of Wilson’s failure to censure British violations of international law. From the beginning of the war, the British navy had been able to maintain a blockade on trade to Germany, and had even deployed underwater mines in the North Sea around neutral Scandinavian countries to do so.⁴⁴

American munitions trade to Europe under these circumstances clearly favored the Allied powers and German-Americans, believing Germany would attempt to hinder this trafficking and thus precipitate an undesirable war between Germany and America, encouraged legislation for an arms embargo.⁴⁵ German-born Congressman Richard Bartholdt spearheaded the effort by co-authoring a bill in the House that would eliminate the sale of weaponry to the warring-countries.⁴⁶ Representative Bartholdt also invited prominent German-American supporters of the embargo, among them President Hexamer of the NGAA and editor of *The Fatherland* George Viereck, to form an organization for the promotion of American neutrality.⁴⁷ Their attempts, however, only garnered them negative attention and cast doubt on their American patriotism and loyalty.⁴⁸ The Germanists saw themselves as loyal Americans desiring freedom from European entanglements foreign to American interests and advocating actions that would preserve peace between America and Germany; the rest of America saw their organizations as transparently based on ethnicity and subservient to the foreign power of Germany.⁴⁹ In response to these criticisms, Bartholdt gave a speech before the House reminding members of the American nation's multi-ethnic heritage, accusing the British and French of manipulating American opinion against Germany, and praising such patriotic organizations as the NGAA as speaking out in the name of American national pride and honesty.⁵⁰ Then he resigned; Congress had lost its greatest German-American member in history, and the NGAA lost their spokesperson in government.⁵¹

The NGAA's political maneuvers became a target of intense criticism; explicitly ethnically-motivated stances on foreign policy were not to be tolerated, especially by those of Anglo-American descent who felt challenged by the initiatives of the NGAA in their claim to be the most "American" of Americans.⁵² More important than this, however, are the specifically political accusations of disloyalty against German-Americans. The issue of maintaining a pluralistic cultural identity was not the primary point of contention and, as Kazal points out, "such efforts to foster a German-American identity...fit well with strains of American civic nationalism prevalent within and outside German America before the First World War."⁵³ Political pluralism was another animal. When the NGAA began pursuing political goals rather than strictly cultural goals, the dividing line between the two became necessarily jeopardized. Concerning matters related to domestic policy such as prohibition and immigration laws, political initiatives by ethno-centric polities, while not encouraged, might be tolerated by dominant strains in American politics. But when foreign policy becomes a plank, the stakes of those relations skyrocket, especially if the national representatives of each ethnicity are currently engaged in a full-scale war. By entering into political debate on American foreign policy and conflating political goals with cultural goals, the NGAA raised the political stakes to such an extent that the cultural foundations of German America were put at risk.⁵⁴ Through their advocacy of ethnic unity and their insistence on the superiority and value of *Kultur*, the cultural Germanists inspired an inimical characterization of all German-Americans in public opinion and more moderate opinions were drowned out by the uproar.⁵⁵ One German-American, writing to the *New York Times*, objected to the displays of partisanship and urged his fellow ethnics to keep a low profile and celebrate their culture in private, but such moderates were often shouted down.⁵⁶ Needless to say, these dissenting voices went unheard by the average American, and the nuances of German-American character and its deep divisions were not grasped.⁵⁷ In this way, the NGAA and many other German-Americans fell victim to the very intolerance for German-American institutions and hostility to cultural pluralism the Germanists had themselves inadvertently catalyzed.⁵⁸

With the sinking of the *Lusitania* in April 1915 came another crisis for German-America. Although they roundly denounced the sinking as a terrible atrocity, fear of war with Germany focused suspicion on German-Americans; they countered with ebullient protestations of American patriotism and loyalty, and there was open marvel by the press at how few of them defended Germany's actions.⁵⁹ Only those that continued to deviate from popular opinion, like certain branches of the NGAA, were subject to intense suspicion and threat.⁶⁰

As the threat of war loomed ever larger, the desires for national unity and loyalty intensified, and tolerance for pluralistic conceptions of America championed by those like the Germanists diminished. This is reflective of the "anti-hyphenism" movement which took hold of America in the fall of 1915.⁶¹ Theodore Roosevelt famously crusaded against the "hyphenates" as being subject to foreign loyalties, and President Wilson's speech to a group of newly naturalized citizens denouncing the political activity of interest groups as categorically un-American lent the movement moral authority.⁶² Russell A. Kazal points out how "an onslaught of antihyphen speeches, editorials, and political cartoons followed," all of them promoting an "undivided loyalty to America."⁶³

In his State of the Union address that year, President Wilson spoke bluntly: "There are citizens of the United States,...born under other flags but welcomed...to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life... [Such men] must be crushed out...the hand of our power should close over them at once."⁶⁴ Outraged, the entire German-American press was almost unanimous in its opposition to Wilson by the following year, and German-American organizations proposed constitutional amendments curtailing President Wilson's executive powers or otherwise impeaching him for pro-English foreign policies.⁶⁵ The NGAA was further drawn into the political sphere by the 1916 presidential campaign.⁶⁶ It was a three way race between Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Charles Evans Hughes.⁶⁷ Due to Roosevelt and Wilson's outspoken anti-Germanism, Republican Hughes became the prime candidate for German-Americans.⁶⁸ The Democratic Party utilized the "anti-hyphenism" rhetoric to discredit their opponent, and Hughes was defeated.⁶⁹ The 1916 presidential campaign thus turned Americanism and loyalty into nationally debated issues.⁷⁰ The NGAA had gambled with their involvement in the presidential campaign of 1916, and they had lost; they now faced a hostile administration and a real possibility of an American war with Germany.⁷¹ It had been the high-water mark of their political efforts to direct foreign policy, and it would be their undoing.

Anti-Germanism attacked the very character and identity of German-Americans, and some then compensated by strengthening ethno-cultural loyalties.⁷² This approach of cultural separatism, coupled with mainstream accusations of disloyalty towards their national community, only further alienated German-Americans from the American society at large.⁷³ By 1917, the attitudes of German-Americans, loyal both to their nation and their ethnic culture, and American "super-patriots," who framed patriotism and Americanism in decidedly Anglo-American terms, had become fully developed; the spark of war would ignite these latent tensions in a way many had foreseen, but few understood.⁷⁴

On February 3, President Wilson, responding to Germany's recommencement of unrestricted submarine warfare, severed diplomatic ties with Germany.⁷⁵ Panicked by the possibility of war, resident aliens across the country rushed to obtain American citizenship; in heavily-German cities like Chicago, ninety-percent of those seeking citizenship were of Austro-German birth.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, state chapters of the NGAA quickly announced their support for Wilson and pledged total loyalty to the American cause.⁷⁷ This was all far too

late. In conjunction with the continued lobbying efforts of NGAA's national organization for neutrality and their continued attack on the English-language press and Wilson's administration as pro-British pawns, these pledges could only seem insincere guises for an enduring pro-German agenda in the eyes of critics.⁷⁸ Regrettably, the national administration of the NGAA blundered even further in its hesitation and failure to openly declare support for the American war effort once it was declared soon thereafter.⁷⁹ Wilson had predicted that with the declaration of war "the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man on the street."⁸⁰ It was a prediction of hardly remarkable prescience. True to their history, nativist progressives utilized the pressures produced by the First World War to narrow conceptions of American nationalism and cultivate intolerance for ethnic cultural allegiances.⁸¹

Luebke asserts that the NGAA had, by 1917, "come to symbolize for the American people all that was arrogant and distasteful about German ethnocentrism."⁸² For an American public, not to mention political administration, sympathetic to the British and French, the NGAA's defense of the Central Powers and criticism of the Allies made the German-Americans seem strongly in favor of their German identity, rather than their American one.⁸³ Only weeks before the declaration of war in 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II bestowed the Order of the Eagle Fourth Class on Charles Hexamer for his presidency and leadership of the NGAA.⁸⁴ After American intervention, the NGAA would seem by this action a branch of the Pan-German League, although it had declined membership in the Germany-based organization for apprehensions about how such a move might hinder their initiatives to spread German culture in America and cast doubt on the members' political allegiance.⁸⁵ After functioning as a full-time political interest group that defended Germany during neutrality, American entry into the First World War meant that they were seen not just as aligned with an unpopular cause, but also a seditious one.⁸⁶

German-American reaction to American intervention was, of course, nowhere near unanimous. There were certainly those that continued to behave in belligerent ways, openly professing pro-German sentiments and proclaiming loyalty to the German cause.⁸⁷ There were also German-Americans who by their intense patriotism sought to distance themselves from their German ethnicity and were critical of fellow German-Americans for their obstinate refusal to assimilate.⁸⁸ It is most likely that many German-Americans fell somewhere between these two extremes; they regretted the war, were professedly loyal to America, but were uncertain about their German ethnicity and what to do about it.⁸⁹ But the NGAA had become so politically active and had garnered so much publicity in doing so that its stance was held to be largely representative of the German-American population in the country.⁹⁰ The NGAA had been so successful at establishing themselves as the representative of dominant German-American ideology that non-Germans quickly associated all German-Americans with the NGAA agenda: an agenda which could no longer be differentiated between political and cultural aims. They pursued political goals with such vigor in the name of Kultur that Kultur became the enemy, and the political nationality of German-Americans fell into question. The American entry into the First World War provoked the latent tensions between German-Americans and society at large into expressions of outright hysteria.

The political administration sought to further institutionalize the control of dissent, arguably in an effort to prevent wanton violence and unsubstantiated accusations of disloyalty. Such a position seems well within the character of the Progressive era, which is

marked by the creation of federal agencies tasked with the overall improvement of society. Russell A. Kazal writes, "Americans of German background were among the first to encounter the 'surveillance state,' that collection of federal agencies and quasi-legal affiliates that emerged during the First World War to keep track of domestic disloyalty and, as frequently happened, dissent."⁹¹ One such agency was the Bureau of Investigation, an arm of the Justice Department, founded in 1908 during the Theodore Roosevelt administration.⁹² In fact, one of the chief goals of the Justice Department during the war was the improvement of American unity during wartime through the hastened assimilation of immigrants and ethnic groups by instructing them on the hazards of disloyal speech and their duties as American citizens.⁹³

President Wilson held a prominent place in this process as the initiatives taken by him and his administration to suppress dissent frequently resulted in the fomentation of anti-German hysteria. Wilson not only articulated his adamant opposition to "hyphenism," but his characterization of the "disloyal element" was so vague it could apply to anyone with contrary opinions.⁹⁴ Moreover, he openly asserted the "Prussian autocratic" character of opposition to American unity and the war effort and spoke alarmingly of the dangers of German spies masquerading as loyal citizens.⁹⁵ Writing in 1917, President Wilson did explicitly state his confidence in German-American's loyalty.⁹⁶ So it may be that Wilson only opposed the political influence of the German-American minority and other organizations that spoke openly against the war. But this message of tolerance and moderation was lost on the American people, drowned out by a swirl of patriotic rhetoric.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the political initiatives taken by his administration in an effort to both generate support for the war and suppress dissent would inevitably be used to target citizens of German ethnic origin.

One of these initiatives was the formation of the American Protective League, an organization of 200,000 voluntary detectives commissioned by Attorney General Thomas Gregory to feed information on disloyal practices to the Justice Dept.⁹⁸ Thomas Gregory, explicitly fearful of German-American citizens from whom, he believed, the government "must necessarily expect trouble of a sinister sort," fully expected the APL to allay the supposed German plots against the country.⁹⁹ Support for the APL functioned on the state level through the National Council of Defense, established by Congress in 1917, which granted expanded legal powers to state governments in order to fight sedition.¹⁰⁰ A third branch of these initiatives was The Committee on Public Information, created by Wilson in order to coordinate propaganda efforts and generate public support for the war.¹⁰¹ The CPI extolled English culture while cultivating a hatred for everything German.¹⁰² Their campaign was successful, and much has been said about the spate of changing the names of streets, towns, food, animals, etc. from German titles to Anglicized and often patriotic counter parts.¹⁰³ One of the CPI's publications, *American Loyalty by Citizens of German Descent*, praised the loyalty of German-Americans who saw themselves as only American, and a CPI advertisement in an August 1918 issue of *Saturday Evening Post* claimed, "German agents are everywhere."¹⁰⁴ In these ways the APL, the NCD, and the CPI provided both for the creation of a government-endorsed police-state atmosphere and for the climate of suspicion targeted at the ethnically German; it justified itself through the continued spread of this fear and paranoia.¹⁰⁵

In the early spring of 1918, two acts of "patriotism" occurred which forced the government to respond to the widespread anti-Germanism. A German-American miner by

the name of Robert Prager, accused of being a German spy, was lynched in Collinsville, Illinois, and another German-American miner named Fritz Monat was whipped until he apologized and was forced to kiss the American flag for “disloyal utterances” in Staunton.¹⁰⁶ The Espionage Act, passed in 1917, allowed the Justice Department to prosecute and punish any critics of the war; the travesties of the Prager lynching and other anti-German vigilantism were proof enough, however, that more government actions was called for.¹⁰⁷ Thus in May 1918, Wilson’s administration expanded its executive power to suppress dissent by passing the Sedition Acts, which would directly curtail any free speech considered disloyal to the United States.¹⁰⁸ It was a direct effort by the administration to both encourage American citizens to report “disloyal utterances” to the Bureau of Investigation and to discourage direct action by citizens. Consonant with progressive ideology, suppression of dissent was to be left to the experts.

Lastly, anti-Germanism in America expressed itself through the passage of legislation that directly targeted what had been held to be the foundations of German ethnic institutions: the German language, education in German, and the German-language press. During the war, twenty-six states passed legislation forbidding the use of the German language in public, and some states forbade the use of German even on the telephone.¹⁰⁹ The ban of German instruction in public schools was another initiative.¹¹⁰ Justice Department official Charles De Woody stated, “We should not forget that kind of propaganda which agitates for the maintenance of the German language in our schools and seeks to maintain a German spirit in our very home life.”¹¹¹ The German-language press became another natural target. These newspapers were required to submit an English translation of its news to the local postmaster for censorship; this lengthy process was time-consuming for the press staff and many newspapers, unable to comply, folded, while other newspapers reported less and less on war-related news.¹¹² Coupled with advertising and distribution boycotts, the German-language press suffered horribly from decrease revenue and distribution; the number of German-American publications by 1920 was 278, half its number in 1914.¹¹³

In January 1918, Senator William H. King of Utah introduced a bill in Congress to repeal the national charter of the National German-American Alliance.¹¹⁴ By this time robbed of the legitimacy of its cultural pluralist goals, the NGAA could only deny, in its defense, accusations made against the Alliance as an organizational agent of the German Empire operating against processes of assimilation and national patriotism.¹¹⁵ Anyone could have predicted Congress’ decision, so the executive committee met for the last time in Philadelphia and dissolved the national organization.¹¹⁶ The last embattled island of united American “*Deutschtum*” shattered, crumbled, and fell into the great ocean of American homogeneity.

The Progressive Era was a time of great change and innovation, and the progressives are to be lauded for their creation of numerous civic institutions and the expansion of a governmental infrastructure capable of addressing the issues of a rapidly modernizing society. It was, at the same time, an era of deep intolerance, and the progressivist mindset is one underpinned by a deeply racist and elitist ideology. The Progressive Era saw the persecution not only of German-Americans, but also of Irish-Americans and, perhaps more importantly, African-Americans. It was the influence of progressivist ideology and its social Darwinist sympathies that resulted in the consolidation of racial segregation policies.¹¹⁷ The problem of German-America during this period was more pronounced, however, because of Germany’s activity in international politics and German-Americans’

identification with its culture. Furthermore, the agitations of the NGAA for “Deutschtum” were grossly misunderstood as representations of political allegiance to Germany, and the association’s political activity coupled with Anglo-American propaganda further blurred the line between culture and politics. Germany and England were at war and, as the threat of American involvement loomed larger, Anglo-Americans demanded a solidarity with their cause which the German-Americans seemed intent on subverting. The tension of these relations were too intense for the progressives to bear with much optimism, and so they desperately plunged into a war to end all wars, an intolerance to combat intolerance, hoping that the blood that flowed from the last rites of violence would somehow cleanse them for an eternity. The ritual worked; “America” won the war.

Endnotes

- 1 Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience*, (Humanity Books, 2000), 223
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