Images of German-Americans During World War I

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I. Introduction

Newspapers and other sources of news media can serve as important historical records. News accounts from years gone by reveal much to the careful reader. Not only do they tell of past events both large and small, but they also speak to the attitudes and opinions of those who lived during the time of those events. Through the pages of a newspaper, the past becomes illuminated through the words of both journalists, and of ordinary people expressing their opinions through the very public medium known as the editorial page. Some of these opinions, and the terminology used to express them, may seem hopelessly archaic, or even offensive, to the present-day reader, while others may still seem to have a note of familiarity or relevance. A close study of the opinions presented in newspapers and other sources of news media can also show how perceptions and ideas changed over time, as well as what factors drove these changes. The following is a study of changing perceptions and opinions, as seen in the news media, with a focus on a specific time period, and a specific group of people. This work focuses on the years of the First World War from an American perspective, beginning with the years immediately preceding this war, and ending with the years immediately following it. The aim is to show how perceptions and images of both Germans and German-Americans changed in the United States during this time, utilizing a selection of newspapers from major American cities as sources not only of journalistic content, but also of opinions generated by both newspaper editorial staffs and by the readers of these publications.

Reading and analyzing a variety of source materials on this subject, both the original voices of those whose words appeared in newspapers nearly a century ago, and the secondary analyses that have since followed, many within the last thirty or so years,
reveals one overarching theme, which can be seen to a greater or lesser degree, within all
the articles and editorials related to Germans and German-Americans during the years of
World War I. This important theme can be summed up in one word: variety. This may
seem obvious, given the prevalence of coverage of the subject in the media at the time,
which has generated an incredible volume of material for the historian to sort through,
but it is precisely this variety of opinion, which ranges from glowing paean s to the
benevolent strength of Kaiser Wilhelm's imperial Germany, to measured approval of the
German people as an ethnic group with a simultaneous condemnation of the supposed
excesses of the Kaiser's government, to latent and even overt hostility directed not only
at foreign nationals, but also at United States citizens of German descent, that is so
interesting and worthy of further examination and study. For every incident such as the
April 5, 1918 lynching of Collinsville, Illinois resident and ethnic German Robert Prager,
an event related by Frederick C. Luebke in the first chapter of his book Bonds of Loyalty:
German Americans and World War I, appropriately titled "Death in Collinsville," there is
the assertion such as the one made by Chicago Daily Tribune reader Frederic Blount
Warren, that "victory for Wilhelm II...means increased and improved civilization, added
enlightenment, [and] heightened prosperity." 1 Even in the midst of the very deepest
depths of the American war campaign, when shots were actually being fired on German
soldiers from American guns, there were still those individuals and groups, some with
German names and some without, who persisted in seeing honor, integrity, and loyalty in
Americans of German descent. The great variety of opinions on this subject that were

Tribune, August 10, 1914, 6.
expressed in the media is an important theme and needs to be given its fair share of attention when considering the sources and analysis presented in this study.

Another prime theme present in the vast array of materials on this subject is that of change over time. Yes, this is a stock theme in the field of history, and something that is present in all areas of the field to one extent or another, but it is especially evident here for several reasons. By the time of the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, Germans had been immigrating to the United States in significant numbers for approximately sixty years, or even longer. During the course of those sixty years, they had as an ethnic group achieved vast gains in their social and economic standing, and had also seen an influx of new groups of immigrants from places in southern and eastern Europe, immigrants who seemed far more stereotypically ethnic than they themselves did. These two factors combined to push German-Americans as a group up the hierarchy of ethnic groups in the United States, farther from the ranks of the newly arrived who occupied the tenements and factories of America’s major cities, and closer to the level of the respectable and established. For these reasons, much of the press coverage of German-Americans in the years immediately preceding the eventful year of 1914 was, indeed, quite positive. Both immigrants to the United States from Germany and American citizens of German descent were largely seen as loyal (indeed, there was no real reason at that time to suspect them of disloyalty), and they were imbued by media accounts and other publications with special and desirable qualities, qualities which they were felt to possess by virtue of their very “German-ness,” so to speak.

2. For a far more in-depth treatment of this phenomenon as it played out in the city of Philadelphia, see Russell A. Kazal’s book *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity.*
Given this rosy and idyllic image, the changes in perception brought about by the intense conflict and heightened tensions of the First World War were in many ways incredibly startling, given their suddenness, rapidity, and vehemence. A great many things throughout history have changed or are continuing to change over time, but not nearly as many have changed so suddenly and so startlingly as the image and perception of Germans and German-Americans in the American popular new media during the second half or so of the 1910s. During the span of only a few years, an amount of time which constitutes only the merest of blips in the grand scheme of history, the popular image of German-Americans underwent a dramatic shift, from that of respected, hardworking, swiftly rising ethnic group, to that of feared, sometimes reviled, continually suspect group of potential enemy agents. There are no crystal clear answers to the question of how it could be possible for German-Americans to lose the goodwill of so many of their fellow Americans so quickly and so completely. But the question is one worthy of consideration, especially when taken in conjunction with the great variety of opinions and perceptions of Germans and German-Americans present in the media during this time. These groups did retain some supporters, yes, but they also attracted vehement detractors in startling numbers. Throughout its pages, this study will continually address these central issues of variety and change.

Though the case of Germans and German-Americans in the media during the First World War may seem remote or unimportant to some readers, it actually still has a great deal of relevance in today's world. This story is the story of a group of people who had started out as just another group of immigrants coming en masse to America's shores, but who were, by the turn of the century, well on their way to becoming accepted members of
American society, only to have that distinction ripped out from under them by many segments of the American populace. A careful consideration of the kinds of language used to portray Germans and German-Americans in the news media during this time, of the rhetoric and images built up around them by everyone from their most ardent supporters to their fiercest detractors, of the ways in which objective reporting and well-thought-out opinions were often all-too-easily abandoned in the name of sensationalism and a misplaced sense of hysteria, can provide readers with insight into issues that go far beyond this specific group of people and this specific point in time. Tracing the progression of opinion and image, and viewing its effect on the strength and prominence of a once vibrant community that was in some ways just as much a casualty of the war years as the soldiers who lay dead on the battlefield, reveals important truths about the ways in which popular opinion shapes reality. The battle waged in the pages of America’s newspapers during the war years over the character of ethnic Germans at home and abroad, over their loyalty, trustworthiness, and even their basic dignity and value, reveals in vivid detail the very prominent position of journalism and public opinion, no matter how ill-informed, sensationalist, or over-simplistic, in shaping the way humans see the world and each other.

The stunning rapidity with which public opinion toward Germans and Americans of German descent changed, and the seething vitriol which was often directed at members of this demographic group during the war years, demonstrate other basic truths about the ever-changing nature of human communication, human relations, and history itself. In some cases, opinions and attitudes remain unchallenged for long stretches of time. Images and rhetoric stay the same, for there is no real reason for them to change.
Sometimes the wheels of history turn slowly, and sometimes they turn so slowly as to be almost imperceptible to all but the most careful of observers. None of these conditions, however, is true of the time period and group of people under discussion. Just as history sometimes moves slowly, so do does it sometimes move at a seemingly breakneck pace. Some historical and social change happens slowly, and some happens very, very quickly. The public image of Germans and German-Americans during the First World War, as seen through the lens of American newspaper coverage, is an excellent example of the kind of change that can occur in seemingly the blink of an eye.

The themes and ideas discussed here in the introduction will be woven into the rest of this study, which will follow a roughly chronological progression through the years of the First World War, beginning toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and concluding with the immediate aftermath of the armistice and peace negotiations. This chronological recounting of the war and surrounding events will utilize articles, editorials, and letters to the editor pulled from a selection of prominent newspapers from across the United States, so as to achieve some sense of the vast array of opinion and great proliferation of thought regarding the worth and character of German-Americans, and their place in American society, if they were to be given any place at all. Hopefully, after a close reading of this work, the reader will come away from it with a sense of the great variety of thought on the subject, as opposed to an elementary understanding of the First World War as a universal anti-German witch hunt of sorts. In addition to this, it is hoped that the reader gains a further understanding of the dramatically sudden nature with which new kinds of opinions on the subject arose during the war years. If the war years were characterized by a great variety of opinions
regarding Germans and German-Americans, they were also characterized by the rise of
many new strains of thought and opinion which had not previously been present in the
national conversation, or had at the very least not been present in a significant way.
Finally, while keeping these themes of variety and change in mind, remember how this
case is a useful and illustrative example of some basic historical principles and truths.
II. Historiographical Overview and Context

While volumes upon volumes have been written about the First World War from a variety of perspectives and on a variety of aspects of the conflict, and while many of those volumes are centered around the German-American experience during the war years, far fewer materials have been produced that deal specifically with the content of press sources and their impact on the public image of Germans and those individuals of German descent. Thus, there is a definite hole in the literature into which this study fits quite nicely. And while they do not have the content of press sources as their specific subject matter, other volumes on the history of the First World War and of German-Americans more generally can be used to provide information and context that prove useful for understanding and interpreting the newspaper articles and editorials that deal with the image of Germans and German-Americans.

An overview of the relevant literature in this area must begin with an examination of the major facts, ideas, and themes surrounding the history of German immigrants to this country. Many of the works on subject emphasize the great variety that existed amongst the Germans who immigrated to the United States, painting a picture of a group that was very diverse in terms of such things as demographics, specific place of origin, occupation, motivation for emigrating, and place of settlement after arrival. This variety among the German-American population fits in very nicely with the great variety of opinions and images generated about this group in the press during the First World War.

The general consensus among those who have written about German immigration to the United States seems to be that people from the region which is now Germany began to migrate to the United States during the colonial period, but that such
immigration did not begin to occur in significant numbers until several decades into the nineteenth century, continuing at a rapid and significant clip until the last part of that century, when German immigrants began to be supplanted, in terms of raw numbers, by even newer arrivals from eastern and southern Europe. In his 1990 work *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, Roger Daniels writes that "between the 1830s and the 1880s, Germans were never less than a quarter of all immigrants. They were nearly a third of all foreign born in 1860, 30.9 percent, and a quarter in 1900, 25.7 percent." These immigration statistics are pretty much par for the course as far as other scholars are concerned. The large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States from the region which after the Franco-Prussian War became the nation of Germany is important as a basis for understanding the large amount of ink devoted to the subject of this population's presence in the United States during the First World War. This group of people was not a mere blip on the nation's radar screen, nor were they some kind of small enclave which kept entirely to themselves in ethnic ghettos. They were an integral part of the human landscape of the United States, and their numbers were too large to be ignored, especially when the nation that was their ancestral homeland and the continuing source of much of their culture also happened to be an enemy of the United States.

In addition to the significant presence of persons of German origin or descent within the United States, other factors that historians agree characterize this demographic group are enlightening and important for understanding the broader concerns of this study, such as why the existence of significant and visible groups of ethnic Germans in

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America’s towns and cities was of such concern to so many people who in turn voiced their opinions in the press. For instance, many historians have written about the motivations which drove millions of people to leave their homes in Germany and emigrate to the United States throughout the years of the nineteenth century. According to these thinkers, and contrary to the romantic and idealistic images which color the popular imagination, many German emigrants were driven by practical, economic concerns, rather than a desire for political or religious freedom. In his article, “The Pattern of German Emigration to the United States in the Nineteenth Century,” Günter Moltmann states that “it has been argued—and correctly so—that in addition to idealistic motivations, economic and social motivations were important, perhaps more important than any other. The number of political and religious dissidents was limited, and the flight from military service has been overemphasized.” Moltmann does not deny that some people did emigrate to the United States from Germany for easily idealized reasons such as to escape religious or political persecution. Indeed, the existence of such groups as the famous Forty-Eighters proves that such was the case. However, for the vast majority of immigrants from this part of the world, the most important consideration was not religion or politics, but rather, the desire to improve one’s social and economic standing. Moltmann bolsters his claim by pointing to what he sees as correlations between the highs and lows of German emigration to the United States and the highs and lows of the American economy. Because the cycles of immigration and business correspond one to the other, Moltmann says, “great significance can be attached to socio-

economic grounds [for emigration], at least with regard to the nineteenth century."5

Many German immigrants to the United States were driven by economic motivations, and many of them did find at least some measure of economic success once they arrived. Economic success and integration only increased the prominence they had already achieved within American society by virtue of the sheer size of their ethnic group within the American population. This prominence made them a particular target for attacks and the like during the war years.

One additional theme that continues to crop up again and again in historical writing on German-Americans during this time period, and a theme that certainly explains much of the reason why German-Americans often became a target for criticism and ire during the years of the First World War, is the idea that German-Americans often had a conception of what it meant to be fully an American that differed from what many native-born Americans, those who held positions of power from which to speak out and those who were mere signatories to letters on the editorial page, felt was the proper way to be an American, not only politically, but also, and in particular, culturally. One article that outlines this idea in a comprehensive and easily understandable manner is Kathleen Neils Conzen's piece "German-Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity," which first appeared in the 1980s. In this extremely helpful and interesting article, Conzen explains what she sees as the relationship between the German-American community, or at least its elite elements, and the concept of a distinct identity based around ethnicity. In her view, "German-Americans had consciously invented an ethnicity for themselves and, in attempting to win acceptance for the legitimate role of such a group identity, had helped

5. Ibid.
also to invent ethnicity itself as a category within American society.  However, Conzen continues, although German-Americans were largely responsible for making ethnic identity a larger and more prominent part of the American social landscape, the problem was that the definition that the elite of German-American intellectuals created for themselves, and thus the definition of ethnic identity that the broader public came to associate with German-Americans, was not something which many native-born Americans saw as acceptable. Thus, at a time when German-Americans badly needed to secure a positive image for themselves in the public’s mind in order to ensure their survival as a group, the publicly expressed views of their leadership were out of step with the majority of the country, and came across as incredibly tone deaf and insensitive, though this appears not to have been the intent of most members of the broader German-American community.

Conzen offers up insightful analysis that makes it much easier to understand the mindset behind the words and actions of the German-American community which so often made it a target for ire and ridicule in the pages of America’s English-language newspapers, as well as the responses to that ire and ridicule by members of the German-American community itself, which appeared in both English-language and German-language newspapers across the country. According to Conzen, members of the German-American intellectual elite constructed their community’s sense of ethnic identity in three distinct steps, or what Conzen calls three “phases of debate.” These phases can be summed up as, in chronological order: preservation of native German culture, “ethnic

7. Ibid, 134.
presence defined...in melting pot terms, and finally, the ever elusive “cultural pluralist ideal.”

The first of these phases, preservation of native German culture, was more typical of early German immigrants to the United States than it was their later counterparts, who were more interested in integrating elements of their cultural heritage into a wider societal arena. Some early German immigrants, particularly those from minority religious sects who were driven by a desire to attain more religious freedom than was available to them in their ancestral homeland, adhered to a strict set of “separatist beliefs.” They believed that only in isolation from native-born Americans and other groups of immigrants to the United States could ethnic Germans be truly themselves, preserving their “virtue as well as [their] cultural values while enjoying the blessings of free American institutions; only in isolation was there any hope that the second generation would remain German.” However, this kind of attempt at preserving and creating a cultural and ethnic identity was doomed to failure due to the extreme impracticality of it for most people.

In its place, the German-American intellectual elite turned to other models of cultural and ethnic identity, models that were focused around not only maintaining German identity among immigrants to the United States and their descendents, but also around extending German culture to the wider populace and blending elements of that culture and identity into broader American culture and American identity in general. These are the phases that Conzen characterizes as “melting pot” and “cultural pluralist ideal.”

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
Many German immigrants and their descendents, writes Conzen, were attracted to the melting pot model of cultural identity, because “it left a role in America for German culture.” This model appealed because it helped to explain and rationalize some of the changes that German immigrants were seeing in their children and other descendents. It explained why, with each generation farther removed from Germany, Americanization increased. It also explained why, even before the war, previously strong, seemingly impermeable community and cultural organizations found their hold on their followers slipping as Americanized attractions outside the community beckoned. But at the same time as it caused Germans to give up some of their hold on their cultural traditions, the melting pot model was tolerable or even attractive for many German-Americans because it meant that parts of their culture, that some of their most desirable culturally ingrained traits, were being stirred into the melting pot and were becoming part of broader American life. Traits, traditions, and the like which were once seen as solely German would also become simply American. The desirability of this, and the pride which it must have given many German-Americans, explains why the melting pot model persisted for so long.

However, as the numbers and prominence of German immigrants and their descendents at the second and third generation level and beyond increased (and they were a quite large and visible population, as discussed earlier), the melting pot model became less and less attractive, both to elite theorizers and to the man on the street. As German-Americans became more and more certain of their place in American society both economically and socially, they became more and more desirous of a model of cultural identity that reinforced the importance of the traditions, patterns of thought, and patterns

of behavior that they thought of as desirable exports of their cultural heritage, a model which would ensure the lasting survival of German culture by proudly and vocally placing it at the center of American life, as a sort of wonderful gift which they had deigned to give to the nation. Conzen explains it thus: "German theorists...converted the vague, cosmopolitan melting pot model...into an aggressive doctrine designed not only to reassure German-Americans that it was possible to survive as Germans in the midst of American society but also to assert the German right to enter the melting pot collectively and on their own terms. The result was a Germanocentric argument...for the special right of Germans to support an ethnic existence in America because of the special gifts that they would ultimately bring into the melting pot."\(^{11}\) In other words, the final model of German ethnic identity, and the one which was prominent at the time of the First World War, made a bold and unapologetic statement about the right of Germans to think and behave as Germans, to adhere to their old cultural norms and traditions, even in America. And not only did they have the right to do that, but that such would be desirable and of benefit to the nation, so mighty was the German cultural tradition. In other words, "in German-American culture, they had convinced themselves, lay the salvation of the nation."\(^{12}\)

While Conzen and other authors on the subject contend that such a course on the part of German-American community leaders was not done with malicious or seditious intent, but rather out of a genuine belief that German culture and patterns of thought would be of tremendous benefit to both their own community and to the nation, this line of thinking did not sit well with many native-born Americans, in both high and low

11. Ibid, 139.
12. Ibid, 140.
positions, particularly after 1914 and the onset of war. The problem lay in the fact that the German-American cultural elite, who were presumed by non-German-Americans to speak for more or less the entire community had a fundamentally different conception of what it meant to be an American, and about the proper place of cultural conformity in American life. For many German-American thinkers, because the United States was founded on political grounds and not on cultural ones, cultural conformity to the predominant model (in the case of the United States, Anglo-Saxon culture) was not necessary to be an American. All that was necessary was political allegiance, and the German-American community claimed that they possessed that in spades. However, for many, but by no means all, native-born Americans who had been raised in the Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition, both political and cultural allegiance and conformity were necessities for truly being an American. It was not enough for these individuals that German-Americans professed and seemed to practice political loyalty. Their cultural deviation from the Anglo-Saxon model and their continued insistence on practicing traditions from a country they had either left or had never even seen in the first place made them suspect. It made them distrusted, and it made it incredibly, shockingly easy for them to be derided as traitors, spies, and all around villains during the years of the war, particularly after American entry into the previously solely European conflict in the spring of 1917. Sadly, it was the inability of the German-American community leadership themselves to understand how their views and attitudes would be perceived in time of war that made it so very easy for their previously mostly respectable image to be ripped to shreds in the press by many native-born Americans once the war began.
Hopefully this discussion of some of the prominent historical thinking about the
nature of the German-American community during the early years of the twentieth
century will prove helpful throughout the rest of this paper in terms of understanding
some of background material underlying the images of German-Americans that were
created in the press around this time. Individuals from the region that became the nation
of Germany had immigrated to the United States in very large numbers throughout the
nineteenth century, so that by the early twentieth century, they made up a very visible
segment of the population. Their motives for coming to the United States, which were
mostly economic, had ensured that they were well integrated into the nation’s economic
structure, and that many of them had achieved at least a modest degree of economic and
social success, making them even more visible and vital to the nation than mere numbers
alone would seem to indicate. This extreme prominence in the American social and
cultural landscape, combined with an attitude toward cultural pluralism that placed them
at odds with many native-born Americans who believed in cultural pluralism only if it
was the first step in a process which would culminate in conformity by all immigrant and
ethnic groups to Anglo-Saxon cultural norms, placed German-Americans at high risk for
falling victim to changing public opinion during the war years. And in fact, as the
remainder of this paper will clearly demonstrate, that is exactly what happened.
III. The Calm Before the Storm: The Pre-War Years

During the early twentieth century, before the specter of war maintained a significant presence in the public's collective consciousness, German-Americans were largely viewed in a favorable light, though of course there were always exceptions. Much of this favorable public image, and much of the praise for German-Americans that lit up the pages of the nation’s newspapers, was based around the supposedly desirable qualities possessed by the this demographic group by the very nature of the fact that they were of German descent. To cite on excellent example, an editorial entitled simply “German-Americans,” which appeared in the September 7, 1908 edition of The Washington Post, spoke very highly of German-Americans and the vital contributions which German cultural and character traits had made to the United States. “We are indebted to the Germans for our love of home, our domesticity, and our simplicity,” wrote the editorial staff of the Post. “These are sterling qualities which have saved us as a nation from many excesses which our sprightly temperament, founded on a basis of Gallic and Celtic origin, might have led us into....Americans of German descent are intensely loyal, frugal, home-loving, and full of respect for law. They have a right to be proud of their lineage. This country owes much to them, and it will think them no less loyal citizens because they honor the roots from which they sprung.”\(^\text{13}\)

This quotation contains several important elements, elements which when fully explained will make the rapid shifts in public opinion and public image that would be occurring within the next several years seem all the more shocking and sudden. First of all, this editorial openly and without hesitation attributes several highly positive and desirable attributes to the German-American community. Qualities such as thriftiness

and domesticity were highly valued in a United States still largely enveloped in Victorian-era cultural modes, and the editorial staff of the *Post* makes the claim here that these qualities stem directly from German culture. In many ways, this kind of claim is reminiscent of the claims made by German-American community leaders themselves that German culture was the font of many good things for American culture and society. What this editorial does is acknowledge that the qualities and traits discussed within it, though they may have originated within German and, more specific to this instance, German-American culture, have since crossed over the boundaries of the specific and into the realm of the universal. This kind of acknowledgement of the positive and universal contributions made to American society by this specific ethnic group, a pattern of thought which is very much in line with the thinking of German-American community leaders during this time, appears repeatedly in the pages of the nation’s newspapers in the years immediately before World War I, but it does not appear with nearly the same force or in nearly the same proportion once the relationship between the United States and Germany became strained by the pressures of war.

Secondly, and so quickly that one might almost miss it if one weren’t paying the closest of attention, the author or authors of this piece have ranked, in some kind of value judgment, the values and temperament of German-Americans above those of other ethnic groups who had perhaps been more commonly acknowledged as the wellspring from which all that was good about America had sprung. “A basis of Gallic and Celtic origin,” as the *Washington Post* put it, was likely to lead the nation into “excesses,” and perhaps it already had. 14 Whereas other cultures were characterized by such traits as impulsiveness, inconstancy, and perhaps even a tendency toward the debauched, German and German-

14. Ibid.
American culture was viewed as steady, and rooted with a firm basis in home, family, country, and economy. This image is a far cry from later images of German-Americans which would appear in the press once the war began, images which, rather than emphasizing these positive qualities, chose to focus on the supposed excesses of German culture, such as their supposed barbarism on the field of battle, their disloyalty to American democracy and their loyalty to German political absolutism abroad, and the prominent role played by beer and other forms of alcohol in their style of socializing. But for now, when war in Europe was still six years away, and American involvement would not happen for another nine, the image of the hardworking, loyal, steady German-American that appears in this editorial and in other press accounts of the time, lines up rather neatly with the German-American community’s conception of itself. Both groups viewed German-Americans as a source of many positive and desirable traits that had worked their way into broader American culture. However, when war came, many members of the populace would forget this, or pretend they had never even thought it in the first place.

In another example that shows just how much German-Americans were valued by their countrymen in the years before war with their ancestral homeland began to loom, in October of 1909, Fred A. Busse, the mayor of Chicago at the time, penned a piece which appeared in the pages of his hometown paper, the Chicago Daily Tribune. In it, he praised German-Americans for their hardworking attitude, and for the many contributions which their work, service, and general attitude had made to the city of Chicago. “The German,” he wrote, “is a good farmer, a good mechanic, a good business man, a good professional man. . . . The large percentage of German immigrants and descendents of
German immigrants in this city...instead of creating race prejudice in Chicago, is a bulwark for municipal harmony and progress."\textsuperscript{15} In this instance, German-Americans are portrayed as hard workers who are present in and excel at nearly every economic area and profession imaginable. Because of their economic and occupational excellence, they have greatly enhanced the image of, and quality of life in, the city of Chicago. Now, it is true that this piece was published on the occasion of German Day, a day on which the nation’s German-American community celebrated the founding of the first permanent German settlement in what was now the United States (Germantown, Pennsylvania), and all the culture and history that had come afterward. And it is true that Chicago, as a large Midwestern city with many economic opportunities, possessed a very large and strong German-American community. But what Mayor Busse wrote should not be passed off as mere pandering by an elected official to his constituents on the occasion of a very special anniversary for them. Rather, the fact that Busse took the time to pen anything at all shows the strength and visibility of the German-American community in his city. His editorial, his commendation, is a marker of how integral the German-American community was viewed to be, both for Chicago, and for the nation as a whole. This community was, in the years before the First World War, strong, organized, visible, and valued. Their presence in Chicago, and surely in other cities as well, was a harbinger, not of strife and conflict, not of disloyalty and sedition, as would be later thought by many to be the case, but of "municipal harmony and progress."\textsuperscript{16} The use by Mayor Busse of those words in particular seems to indicate that the German-American community was thought to be the source of these positive things, instead of mere bystanders to or

\textsuperscript{15} Fred A. Busse, "German-Americans in Chicago," \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, October 3, 1909.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
beneficiaries of them. For this brief shining moment at the end of first decade of the twentieth century, German-Americans were finally enjoying widespread public approval and admiration, something they had been deeply desirous of and thought that they deserved. The coming of war within the next few years, however, would disrupt this moment in startling and dramatic fashion. The next section will demonstrate just how quickly and completely the dream collapsed.
IV. The Impact of the War Across the Sea

On July 29, 1914, mere days after the official outbreak of war on the European continent, the editorial staff of the Abendpost, one of Chicago’s most prominent and influential German-language newspapers, published an editorial that strongly condemned what they saw as grossly unfair language being used against the German state and its people, and thus, by extension, the German-American community as well, and called on their readership to be on the lookout for such abuses in the press so that they could arm themselves against them. In extremely dramatic and perhaps overwrought fashion, the piece began with a quotation from the Bible: “Herr, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.” Or in other words, “Lord, forgive them, for they know not that they do.”

With these words, spoken by Jesus on the cross immediately before his death, the editors of the Abendpost cast themselves in the role of saintly, perfect martyr, persecuted for supposed crimes of which they were in fact entirely innocent. The persecutors in this case? The English-language press, both in Chicago and in other cities across the country. English-language journalists on seized on the occasion of the newly broken out war to engage in some sensationalistic journalism, with Germans, and soon German-Americans as well, to get the short end of the stick, as they would be painted as barbarians and traitors. The Abendpost also claimed that the war coverage by the English-language press, particularly in Chicago, but elsewhere as well, was, for all practical intents and purposes, indistinguishable from war coverage in the Russian cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, though Russia was engaged in the war against Germany, and the United States, at this point, was most decidedly not. From the perspective of the Abendpost, English-language journalists were taking sides when they ought not to, and they were

painting Germans, and by extension, German-Americans, in an unfair and defamatory light.

The editorial staff of the *Abendpost* may have overstated their case a bit by implicitly comparing the German nation and the German-American community to Jesus, but at the heart of it, they were right to notice a sudden and increasing trend of ugly press accounts directed at these groups. Though the United States was officially neutral at this time, as it would remain for the next several years, many Americans were either unwilling or unable to keep their thoughts neutral (or to themselves), and this tendency was often to the detriment of German-Americans. In his excellent and thorough book *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I*, Frederick C. Luebke writes of how difficult it was for many Americans to maintain neutrality of thought, because their sympathies lay with the culture they usually thought of as encompassing all American values: British culture, more specifically English. “The values and attitudes associated with Anglo-Saxon Protestantism were identified as those of American society in general; cultural characteristics diverging from this standard were expected to be discarded or remodeled,” writes Luebke.\(^{18}\) In other words, though they had been willing to acknowledge some positive qualities supposedly possessed by German-based culture, when push came to shove, many native-born Americans still identified primarily with British culture, as the two nations shared many things besides language. “Perhaps,” Luebke ruminates, “old-stock Americans could be neutral in their outward behavior, but their emotions were not so easily suppressed.”\(^{19}\) In the popular imagination, the war in Europe became an emotional struggle, pitting the supposed forces of British democracy


\(^{19}\) Ibid.
against the supposed forces of German autocracy. And in this overwrought emotional
struggle, Germans, and eventually, German-Americans would be the clear losers,
particularly in the realm of popular opinion and image.

"Before the first month of the war had passed, [the American public] read lurid
stories of German brutality. They world was told how innocent Belgium had been
wantonly raped and pillaged: the cultural treasures of Louvain had been destroyed,
defenseless civilians had been massacred, fiends in German uniforms had amputated the
breasts of Belgian women with the stroke of a sword, Belgian children had been
bayoneted," and so on and so forth.²⁰ While no doubt many unfortunate things did occur
during the German invasion of Belgium, many of the press accounts on the subject in the
United States were at the very least greatly embellished, and at worst, completely
fabricated. These stories were often colored by British propaganda, sent across the ocean
via cable. But, regardless of the veracity of these press accounts, they did have an almost
immediate impact, turning the tide rather suddenly against both the German people and
their American counterparts. These accounts, writes Luebke, "greatly strengthened a new
stereotype" about Germans and German-Americans."²¹ The old positive image of these
people, which emphasized their hardworking ways and deep cultural base, "gave way to a
harsh picture of unyielding efficiency and strength, of arrogant militarism and
imperialism."²² The tide was beginning to turn, and once it did, it would bring with it an
incredible barrage of unrelentingly negative press, both from professional journalists, and
from everyday citizens.

²⁰. Ibid, 85.
²¹. Ibid.
²². Ibid, 86.
For example, in 1915, the New York Times, the nation’s preeminent and most respected newspaper, published an editorial in which they claimed that Germans “had been transformed from a nation worthy of the world’s esteem and admiration into a people who stand apart from other nations, distrusted and feared, disturbers of the peace, a menace to the general security, and now pursuing their ends by the hideous atrocities perpetrated in Belgium and France, by deeds of monstrous inhumanity....they have been bred away from the high and noble things in life.”23 Such statements in the press were often accompanied by graphic images, such as a cartoon from the July 25, 1915 edition of popular publication Life magazine, which portrayed a stereotypical goose-stepping German soldier, with the bodies of innocent women and children speared on his bayonet.24 The war for the public’s hearts and minds in the press turned ugly and bitter very, very quickly.

Given the graphic nature of many of the political cartoons, illustrations, and articles that were appearing in the English-language press at this time, is it any wonder that the sensationalistic and exaggerated opinions of professional journalists had a major impact on the average American citizen, or that vitriol initially directed at Germans abroad began to become a lens through which to view German-Americans as well? The editorial pages of the nation’s newspapers began to fill up with opinions of Americans who were either influenced by sensationalistic press accounts or who had held those beliefs already. For example, in the January 9, 1915 issue of the Chicago Daily Tribune, a lengthy and rather angry letter was published on the paper’s “Voice of the People” page, signed by an individual calling himself “A Loyal American.” This individual was

23. Ibid.
extremely concerned by what he saw as the presence and influence of disloyal elements within the German-American community.

"It is high time for Congress to take action against the alien enemies that we have taken to our bosom and that are now emulating the viper that when warmed by the woodman tried to sting him to death," wrote A Loyal American, engaging in some colorful language. He then continued by saying, "I should like to see the genuine Americans who have no divided allegiance unite against the blatherskites and demagogues that are constantly betraying the interests of our country to appeal to the foreign born vote." In other words, there were, in his opinion, disloyal groups in America who, rather than being shunned as they so richly deserved, were egged on by special interests and politicians who were more interested in personal gain than in protecting the United States and its interests. A Loyal American believed that it would be possible to get rid of these disloyal elements in American life through significant effort and strict consequences, and in proposing his solution, he revealed what specific demographic group he held responsible for endangering American safety and security. It would be possible for loyal Americans to purge society of its enemies from within, "even in Wisconsin, where the kaiser is more respected by a certain type of politician than is the president of the United States, and where American culture and civilization are daily sneered at by the beribboned 'vons' who are serving the fatherland in the guise of American citizens." Clearly, for a Loyal American, German-Americans were the dangerous and seditious element that threatened the United States.

27. Ibid.
The two sides of the coin here discussed worked together to influence and control the public image of Germans and German-Americans in the early years of the war prior to American entry into the conflict. It began, as picked up on by the *Abendpost*, immediately after the declaration of war in Europe, as reports from the war began to filter over to the United States via the British-American transatlantic cable (the German-American transatlantic cable had been cut by the British early in war, making it difficult for war news from a German perspective to reach the United States, further exacerbating the German-American public relations problem). Once war news reports had either reached the United States from British journalists or from American war correspondents abroad, they were exaggerated and embellished by American journalists and newspaper publishing companies who were eager to attract readership by giving the public the sensationalistic news that it craved. Sensationalistic news reports, in turn, influenced the opinions and perceptions of average American citizens, many of whom were already predisposed to be sympathetic to the British due to their own cultural loyalties. These people, in turn, began to pen a large number of editorials and letters to the editor that utilized sensationalistic, embellished news reports and inherent cultural biases to further contribute the public relations problem that was facing German-Americans. The years of American neutrality were, for many in the German-American community, colored by what they felt were unfair news reports and vitriolic editorial writing. If the editorial staff of the *Abendpost* felt that things were bad in 1914, if they felt that their community was being treated unfairly then, then they had only to wait until the spring of 1917, when the United States entered into the war on the side of the Allies and against Germany, to see just how uncomfortable and oppressive the atmosphere around them could really become.
V. The Power of Patriotism: German-Americans in Wartime

While the years of official American neutrality brought a measure of hardship for the German-American community, as they were portrayed in the press as the descendents and relatives of Europe's, and possibly the world's, most barbarous and depraved nation, and as possible enemy agents or spies on behalf of their ancestral homeland, the fact that America was technically neutral (in action, if not in sympathies) blunted the damage that could be done to the community. The German-American community suffered from a major public relations problem, but as long as the United States remained neutral, German-Americans were not subject to the same persecution as actual enemy combatants would be, and thus, they were spared some measure of suffering. The official American declaration of war in April 1917, however, changed all that, and made German-Americans the targets of government image makers and opinion shapers in addition to those ones who wrote for the popular press. As German-American socialist activist Oscar Ameringer later recalled, 1917 and 1918 "were the sweetless, wheatless, meatless, heatless, and perfectly brainless days when your fathers broke Beethoven's records, boycotted Wagner's music, burned German books, painted German Lutheran churches and Goethe's monument in Chicago the color of Shell filling stations [yellow]; strung up a Mennonite preacher...by his neck....[and] hanged another to a limb of a tree in Collinsville, Illinois, until he was dead."28 Everywhere one looked, one was assaulted by a barrage of negative images and opinions, all directed at the supposed German menace and its American offshoot.

Much of the nation's English-language press lavished an enormous amount of ink on stories, cartoons, editorials, and letters to the editor which called into question the

loyalty of the entirety of the German-American community. The atmosphere, and the press coverage, were ugly. A political cartoon entitled “Camouflage” appeared in print around this time. In it, a stereotypically beer-bellied and mustachioed German-American man with a long-stemmed pipe in his mouth and a foaming beer stein held high, sits in an armchair in front of a window. One of his hands is extended out the open window, waving an American flag for onlookers on the street below to see. His other hand, however, the one holding the beer stein, is raised as if making a toast, and a speech bubble emanating from his mouth proclaims, “Hoch der Kaiser,” which is a toast to the German Emperor. The meaning of this cartoon is quite clear. German-Americans, portrayed in an ugly, offensive, and stereotypical manner, may publically proclaim loyalty to the United States, and they may engage in acts of patriotism, such as the display of an American flag, but in their hearts, they are still subversives who are disloyal to the United States and who offer toasts to the life and health of the Kaiser—the supreme enemy of all loyal Americans—in the privacy of their homes. The message which the public was supposed to absorb from this cartoon was plain as day: Do not trust your friends and neighbors of German descent, for they are, at the very least, disloyal in their sentiments, and they are, at the very worst, enemy agents and spies.

While such was the message from professional journalists that appeared in the popular press, ordinary citizens got in on the action as well, penning letters that showed they had clearly absorbed the messages about German-American disloyalty that filled their papers every morning. One letter to the editor, published in the Chicago Daily Tribune, advocated a rather extreme solution for dealing with the rather fictive problem of German political disloyalty. “Let us hope that before long,” the author of the letter
wrote, "our government will stop dilly-dallying with these so-called German-Americans and put them into concentration camps until the end of the war, which end would be materially hastened by such action, especially if coupled with the entire suppression of the German-American press." Clearly, this individual had fully absorbed, if he had not already possessed, the views advocated by many professional journalists and editorial writers. The fact that the actions his plan advocated were quite possibly illegal violations of Constitutional writs was none of his concern, for if German-Americans were secretly or not so secretly so disloyal, they did not deserve Constitutional protections anyway.

The image of the German-American as a spy in the employ of the German imperial government was a particularly popular one during the years of American war involvement. One cartoon, which was published in the January 24, 1918 issue of popular periodical *Life* magazine, which ran with the caption "A Sweetheart In Every Port," showed a man, dressed in a sailor suit and labeled "German Intrigue," surrounded by portraits of five women, who were drawn in a stereotypical fashion. Each woman's portrait represented a group of Germans in a different port city: San Francisco, Boston, New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Using the popular image of the sailor with a female paramour in every port of call, *Life* made the claim that the country's various German-American communities were actually full of spies who delivered important information to the Germans, thereby endangering the security of the United States. German-Americans were, to put it a slightly more crude way, in bed with the Germans, and thus could not be at all trusted.

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30. Ibid, 237.
31. Ibid, 246.
Another fear, largely unfounded, that proliferated in the popular press was that German-Americans would commit acts of industrial sabotage in order to harm the United States' war effort and aid that of the Germans. A cartoon from the Chicago Daily News illustrates how the thought process behind this fear worked. In it, a bearded man labeled "Spy" peers out from the entrance of a tent made out of the American flag and labeled "Citizenship." A box of dynamite sits beside him, and he is staring off in the distance at smoking factories, presumably plotting to bomb them to smithereens for the good of the German war effort. The intended message in this cartoon could really not be any clearer (no one said the press got any points here for subtlety). German-Americans were using the cloak of their American citizenship to protect them from suspicion, when in reality, they were plotting acts of sabotage and violence against the nation that had taken them in and seen fit to give them that citizenship in the first place.

The popular press, as well as everyday citizens who expressed their views in the pages of newspapers, relished in portraying German-Americans as subversives, spies, and saboteurs, regardless of the truth and regardless of the facts. Gone were the days in which German-Americans were valued by the press and members of the public for their hard working nature and their loyalty. Those qualities had been stripped away and replaced by the image of the beer stein clinking, Kaiser toasting, dynamite planting spy why hid behind the protections afforded him by his adopted country. This image was one which would stay with the public after the war was over, and the whole debacle was a catastrophe from which the nation's German-American community would never fully recover, despite its best efforts to do so.

32. Ibid, 147.
VI. Sympathy in Unexpected Places: Alternative Images in the Media

Despite the rhetorical violence which was committed against German-Americans in the pages of America's news media, the picture was not entirely bleak. Things were, to be sure, quite grim, and the overwhelming impression was harsh, but editorials and the like did crop up in newspapers at times which expressed sympathy for the plight of German-Americans as their adopted country went to war with a nation in which many of them still had family members and friends, and which did not hesitate to reassure their readership of the loyalty of the vast majority of the German-American population.

One example of this is a piece published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on February 5, 1917, around the time of the American diplomatic break with Germany. "It is impossible to ask German-Americans not to feel bitterly about our break with Germany. There are fighting in them the instincts or nativity against the oaths of allegiance," the newspaper's editorial staff reminded its readers. However, the writers of the piece continued, "No one can doubt which will win. An inconsiderable few, perhaps, will be unable to control themselves. But the vast majority will show themselves to be Americans as true as their fathers and grandfathers in the civil war."³³

In addition to these extremely generous and gracious statements, made all the more so by the time period in which they were made, the *Tribune* went on to call on its non-German-American readers to treat their neighbors of German descent with respect and decency. "There is no place today for the swaggering, suspicion mongering patriot. It is Americans of heredity other than German who must guard their tongues and control their answers." The paper called on every citizen, whatever their heritage, to observe loyalty and unity. "It is the primary duty of every citizen to avoid every word or act

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which may make the United States any less a unit. Since August, 1914, there have been forces in this country busily feeding prejudices, insistent upon hatred of one side or the other....[But] it is solely as Americans that we must act." Finally, the editorial concluded with a firm statement in favor of German-Americans and their position in American society. "The German-Americans are good citizens of the United States....To lose the German-Americans would be a greater loss to the United States than to lose half an army."

Another powerful statement on behalf of German-Americans which reaffirmed their loyalty while recognizing the delicate position a declaration of war against Germany would place them in came from the same paper, the Chicago Daily Tribune, in an editorial from March 26, 1917. "We know from experience," the paper assured its readership, "that German-Americans will fight devotedly for their adopted country, and if we were threatened with invasion even by Germany there would be no doubt the German-Americans would help expel the invaders." At a perilous moment in United States history, the Tribune took the time to take a stand for German-Americans.

While the Tribune felt certain of the willingness and ability of German-Americans to take up arms to defend their adopted country against their ancestral homeland, the editorial staff was also very much of the opinion that they should not have to. "We must realize that the German-Americans who are loyal to this country are passing through an experience of real anguish....These, our fellow citizens, our neighbors and worthy coworkers in upbuilding of America, are torn between two sincere and honorable devotions. They are following the biblical saying, they are leaving father and mother and cleaving to the wife. But the necessity of choice is a bitter one." German-Americans

34. Ibid.
were trying to do the honorable thing and remain loyal to their adopted country, but as many still had friends and relations in Germany, the *Tribune* felt that it was too cruel and inhumane to force them into the fight. "It is part of good citizenship and of common human feeling to try to help the German-Americans in this trial, to avoid offending their susceptibilities...to try to make them feel that we do not doubt their loyalty which recognizing their sympathies." In light of what was happening in the broader political sphere at this time, as the United States moved ever closer to a formal declaration of war against Germany, and in light of the other images of Germany and German-Americans which proliferated in the popular press during this time, even within the pages of the *Tribune* itself, it is rather astounding that such editorials as this and the one that preceded it were ever written and published. They show an uncommon kindness in an atmosphere that was generally incredibly unfriendly toward German-Americans, even those who gave no indication of harboring disloyal feelings. That such opinions could, to some degree, coexist within the incredibly charged climate of public opinion at this time, is a powerful indicator of the deep complexity and confusion existing around the image of German-Americans. However, the compassion and complexity of feeling demonstrated in these two editorials was unfortunately rare relative to the preponderance of editorials, articles, and letters to the editor that spewed vitriol and fear and which portrayed German-Americans as enemy agents.

VII. Conclusion

The position of German-Americans within American society during the early twentieth century was extremely precarious and complicated, to say the least. German-Americans had been coming to the United States in significant numbers for over half a century prior to the First World War, and has been discussed, by the first decade of the twentieth century, they had collectively ascended up the social ladder far enough achieve some measure of respectability in larger society. Their motivations for emigrating to America, which were largely economic in nature, had brought them into contact with non-German-Americans, and had helped them achieve economic and social success. This success, coupled with their large numbers and effective community organization, placed them in a prominent position in American society even before the specter of war with Germany turned renewed attention on them. Their economic success and social prominence helped lead to the construction of a positive identity and image for them in the popular press, an image focused around their supposed positive qualities such as thriftiness and love of family. This positive image in the early-twentieth century was a boon to German-Americans who had long wished to have their positive qualities and achievements recognized by broader society.

During the war, however, even before the period of American involvement, the positive image that German-Americans had so long desired and had worked so hard to achieve came crashing down under a rapidly swelling tide of anger and vitriol, a tide which had begun to grow almost immediately after the outbreak of war in Europe. German-Americans went from being portrayed as hard-working and prosperous individuals to disloyal enemy agents who cloaked themselves in patriotism and
proclaimed loyalty in public, but who secretly toasted the Kaister, passed along
information to the German government, and plotted acts of sabotage behind closed doors.
However, despite this extremely negative portrayal, most German-Americans were, as
the editorials from the Chicago Daily Tribune discussed in the previous section make
clear, loyal to their adopted country, and ready to do what they needed to do to defend it
from enemies. Why, then, was there such a disconnect in the press between the way
German-Americans actually behaved, and the way they were portrayed?

The answer can be found by circling back to Kathleen Neils Conzen's piece on
German-American ethnic identity. German-Americans largely saw their identity as
existing in two halves. On the one hand, they professed, and truly felt, political loyalty to
the United States. Once they had left Germany and come to America, America
commanded their full political and national allegiance. On the other hand, however, the
vast majority of German-Americans saw no harm in maintaining cultural allegiance to
old German traditions and ways. For them, the two were separate and distinct, and there
was therefore nothing wrong or disloyal about continuing to speak German, continuing to
have a beer on Sunday, or continuing to profess an affinity for German music and
literature. Political loyalty and cultural identity were two different things.

However, many native-born Americans, who had been raised in the Anglo-
American cultural tradition, full loyalty in both the cultural and political spheres was
necessary in order to be a good American. Thus, actions that to German-Americans
seemed fairly innocuous, such as continuing to read newspapers in their native language,
were interpreted by many of the opinion makers in the popular English-language press as
evidence of disloyalty and seditious intent. Many of the public image problems
encountered by German-Americans during the war years stem, in the final analysis, from misinterpretation of motivations and worldviews on the part of both native-born Americans and German-Americans. Unfortunately, however, this clash of cultures and beliefs presented the German-American community with a crisis of image from which it never fully recovered, despite the appearance of editorials which strived to remind native-born Americans to have compassion on their neighbors and friends of German extraction, who were faced with a major crisis of identity.
VIII. Bibliography

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