Anti-German Hysteria in Wisconsin

by Scott Noegel

Given the popularity of Milwaukee's German Fest and many local Oktoberfest celebrations, it is difficult to imagine a time in Wisconsin when German Americans were viewed with suspicion, even prejudice. Then again, as a descendant of German immigrants, I find it difficult to think of Germans as a minority, but they were. Indeed, glares of distrust, derision, and contempt were very real experiences for the first immigrant German communities and their descendants.

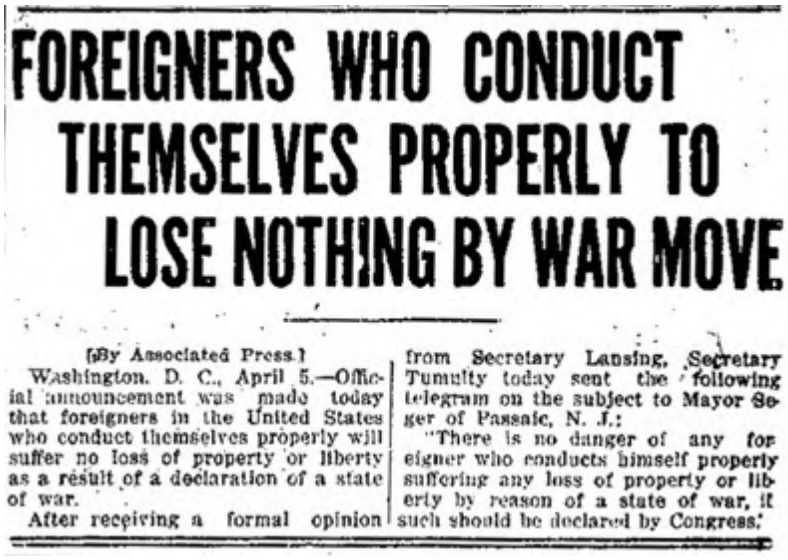
The rapid influx of so many German settlers created trepidation for some "Yankees," the term Germans used for non-immigrants, even though all the Yankees themselves had descended from still earlier immigrants. The apprehension was in part derived from the fact that Germans tended to group together in tightly-knit communities. They also gave their settlements German names and created German societies to promote their own culture. Even more concerning, they insisted upon speaking their own language, and they published many newspapers in German. Already by 1894, there were about 800 German papers being published in the United States. Of the six published in Sheboygan alone in 1895, three were in German.[1]

Suspicions against Germans were heightened first during the Civil War when national loyalties were put in check. Yankees were quick to observe that most Germans in Wisconsin sided with the Democratic Party and thought of the battle as "Lincoln's War."[2] Germans in Washington County contributed financially, but were reluctant to send their sons. There were even protest riots, the most violent of which took place in Port Washington.[3] However, in Sheboygan County, German newspapers opined that acting against the war would only reify Yankee suspicions, and so they urged Germans to enlist.[4] The Sheboygan *National Demokrat*, dated January 11, 1861, is representative:

> Honor the German! Joy is generally felt among the Germans because the German volunteers were first, it was self-explanatory that they should fight on behalf of their fatherland. Now the Germans must show that they cannot be exceeded in patriotism by natural-born Americans.[5]

Though many enlisted and fought bravely, anti-German sentiments were not assuaged. In fact, they became especially evident again in 1889, when Iowa County Assemblyman, Michael Bennett, sponsored a compulsory national education bill that aimed to force schools to teach subjects only in English. This incensed the German population who saw it as a Yankee attempt to extinguish the German language in the United States. German Catholics and Lutherans argued that it threatened their system of parochial education. However, defenders of the law saw English as "America's language" and the law as necessary to stop the degeneration of American culture.[6] The motion was unsuccessful, but it was the first serious shot across the bow for German Americans.

A second, lethal shot came during World War I (1914-1919), when the United States was engaged against Germany. It was during this period that Germanophobia reached its zenith. One historian remarked that Wisconsin "was generally regarded as a hot bed of disloyalty and pro-Germanism. Businessmen of neighboring states talked of boycotting all Wisconsin goods and the War Department fully expected to be compelled to send troops in to quell draft disorders."[7]



FOREIGNERS WHO CONDUCT THEMSELVES PROPERLY TO LOSE NOTHING BY WAR MOVE

(By Associated Press.)

Washington, D. C., April 5.—Official announcement was made today that foreigners in the United States who conduct themselves properly will suffer no loss of property or liberty as a result of a declaration of a state of war.

After receiving a formal opinion from Secretary Lansing, Secretary Tumulty today sent the following telegram on the subject to Mayor Seger of Passaic, N. J.:

"There is no danger of any foreigner who conducts himself properly suffering any loss of property or liberty by reason of a state of war, if such should be declared by Congress."

In fact, there was some protest against the war, led most notably by Wisconsin Senator, Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, and Milwaukee's former Socialist Mayor, Emil Seidel, but the reaction against German communities far

outweighed the size of the protest. The fear of German Americans loomed so large that Congress moved to assure that all "foreigners" living in the United States would not suffer repercussions during the war. The snippet on the previous page appeared in the *Sheboygan Press*, April 5, 1917.

One cannot over-estimate the fever of anti-Germanic hysteria that spread through Wisconsin. At first, people voiced their patriotism by removing Bach and Beethoven from concert programs and renaming streets, but soon they began to boycott German products like beer and sausage. Sauerkraut was relabeled "liberty cabbage."[8] Some demonstrations even turned violent. German textbooks were burned in Baraboo, and throughout Wisconsin, German citizens were attacked by random mobs for not showing enough patriotic fervor. A German Professor at Northland College was dragged from his home at midnight by a dozen masked men, taken more than a mile away to an empty field, stripped naked, and tarred and feathered. He was forced to return naked by foot through the snow.[9] Some people were even lynched.

Pressures to join the war effort were immense, and as in the Civil War, German Americans again demonstrated their allegiance by enlisting. Nevertheless, the young enlistees could not help but feel it sadly ironic that their parents and grandparents had risked so much to find freedom in a land in which they were now politically suspect.

The fear of German Americans was not lost on the United States government for it quickly convened a Committee on Public Information (CPI). The CPI aimed to secure public support for the war by creating what they called the "Four-Minute Men." This group consisted of more than 75,000 volunteer speakers who visited schools, churches, and town meetings to convince people of the war's virtues. Farmers were used to pitch the message to other farmers, businessmen to businessmen, and foreign language speakers to immigrant communities.

A poster from "To Hell with the Kaiser," 1918

The government also enlisted the film industry, and soon there appeared a slew of anti-German films such as *The Kaiser*: *The Beast of Berlin* and *The Prussian Cur and Wolves of Kultur*, and even D. W. Griffith's famous epic *Birth of a Nation*. In an age before Netflix, these silent films and their negative, stereotyped depictions of Germans reached eight million people every week.

The impact of such campaigns can be seen in the dramatic decline of German newspapers. In 1910, there were nearly 600 such papers circulating in the United States. By 1919, there were only twenty-six dailies left.[10] Also abolished at this time were the last surviving German language programs in Wisconsin's elementary schools, and by 1922 only 0.6 percent of high school students were enrolled in German.[11] It is during this period too that Wilhelm opted to be called William, Karlina preferred Caroline, Ludwig became Louis, and so on. The hysteria had taken its toll.

The pressure for descendants to prove themselves as Americans increasingly subsided after the war as family structures began to change and a shift in identity took place from local to national affiliation;[12] and by World War II, the American landscape had absorbed the immigrants' descendants so completely that the German origins of their names mostly went unnoticed during roll calls. They now were thoroughly Yankee. The Nazi regime and its atrocities guaranteed that anti-German sentiment would survive for many years, even if focused elsewhere. They also ensured that boasting one's German heritage would be politically incorrect in

America for many years. Yet, as the decades passed, so also did the hold of older views, but along with it, a full grasp of what it was like when those of German descent faced prejudice. Consequently, for the ensuing generations like my own, beer, sausage, and sauerkraut were as American as apple pie, except during German Fest and other heritage celebrations, when steins, lederhosen, and dirndl-costumes remind us otherwise.

Endnotes

[1] See, *Sheboygan Centennial Celebration, 1853-1953, Souvenir Program*, p. 13.
[2] Frank L. Klement, *Wisconsin in the Civil War: The Home Front and the Battle Front, 1861-1865* (Madison, WI.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997), pp. 26-31.
[3] See Lawrence H. Larsen, "Draft Riot in Wisconsin, 1862," *Civil War History* 7 (1961), pp. 421-427.
[4] On religious life and attitudes towards the Civil War, see Helmut Schmahl, *Verpflanzt, aber nicht entwurzelt: Die Auswanderung aus Hessen-Darmstadt (Provinz Rheinhessen) nach Wisconsin im 19. Jahrhundert* (Mainzer Studien zur Neueren Geschichte, 1; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1999), pp. 272-273.
[5] Ehre den Deutschen! Allgemein ist die Freude unter den Deutschen, daß die deutschen Freiwilligen die ersten waren, welche sich bereit erklärten für ihr Vaterland zu kämpfen. Jetzt müssen die Deutschen zeigen, daß sie an Patriotismus sich von den eingebornen Amerikanern nicht übertreffen lassen.
[6] Roger E. Wyman, "Wisconsin Ethnic Groups and the Election of 1890," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 51 (1968), pp. 269-293 (269).
[7] W. E. Morton, *et al*., eds., *Wisconsin Centennial Story of Disasters and Other Unfortunate Events, 1948-1948* (Wisconsin State Centennial Committee, 1948), p. 8.
[8] This is reminiscent of the Republican effort to rename French fries as "freedom fries" after France expressed its disapproval of the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ironically, the term "French fries" was coined to replace "German fried potatoes" during World War I.
[9] The Professor was E. A. Schimler. Reported, *inter alia*, in the *Ashland Daily Press*, April 1, 1918.
[10] The surviving newspapers eventually succumbed to the Great Depression. See Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 26.
[11] See Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom*, p. 25.
[12] Many myths inform the mistaken view that new immigrants quickly became bilingual and that they forced or encouraged their children to learn English. Most German families had limited command of the English language in rural Wisconsin until the third and fourth generations. See Miranda E. Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons, "'Good Old Immigrants of Yesteryear' Who Didn't Learn English: Germans in Wisconsin," *American Speech* 83 (2008), pp. 259-283.

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