

“A Revolution in the Public Mind”: American Anxiety and German-Americans in New York State during the First World War

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Abstract

The pressures of the First World War contributed to a renegotiation of citizenship within the United States as many citizens sought to reinforce and often to prove their loyalty to the state. Wartime developments and political rhetoric exacerbated ethnic tensions, leading many Americans to voluntary vigilant organizations like the American Protective League, an auxiliary organization of the Department of Justice aimed at public surveillance of German-Americans or anyone not contributing to the war effort. Vigilant organizations targeted German ethnicity in New York. Many desired to end Germanic influences by varying means that included abolishing German language education in public schools. Vigilant voluntarism left its mark on the social, cultural, and political lives of German-Americans in New York. Americans of German ethnicity navigated wartime anxiety in differing, often personal, ways, varying from overt expression of loyalty, to voluntary suppression of their heritage. This paper focuses on the culture of vigilance in New York State and provides specific individual German-American responses in New York City. What emerges is a picture of social and cultural adaptation in wartime New York, along with a new understanding of obligations of citizenship during war.

“A single allegiance to one flag, one hope, one government, one protection, and one set of ideals which make of him a man and an American.”¹

-Office of the Adjutant General, Division of Aliens, New York State

A small envelope found its way into the mailbox of Brett Page of New York with the inscription “Department of Justice” in the corner. Page was instantly overcome with excitement as it presented him with his first orders to investigate an alleged case of disloyalty. The suspect’s name was Martha Martin and she resided in a small residence on East Sixty-Sixth St. in Brooklyn, New York. The initial letter read:

It is reported to this office that this person has openly declared she believes the sinking of the Lusitania was right and proper, that she hopes every United States transport will meet the same fate

¹ On what Americanization means for the foreign born. *Adjutant General's Office Records* (Albany, New York, 1917-1918), New York State Archives.

and that she only wishes she were a man back in Germany, so she could fight for the fatherland. Furthermore, she has said that anything she can do to aid Germany in this country, she will do gladly... Please determine the subject's real sentiments, and report to this office whether or not in your opinion, the subject is detrimental to the interests of this country.²

Page proceeded with caution to complete a thorough investigation. He wanted to uncover the truth to either protect the country from disloyalty, or protect Miss Martin from unwarranted gossip. Like a classic spy novel, Page tailed Miss Martin as she went on her morning stroll. He watched her every move. When they finally met and questioning commenced, she showed her birth certificate and even found it necessary to reveal that her family history dated back to the American Revolution. Martha Martin was willing and eager to help with the investigation, equating it to serving her country. Having concluded the investigation, Page recorded that Miss Martin was apparently the object of slander due to her friendship with a local man of German descent. Page recalled, "As I walked down the street a curious thought came to me. Not once in all the interviews had I been asked for my credentials. Everyone had been eager to aid."³

Brett Page was not an agent of the Department of Justice. He was a member of the American Protective League, an auxiliary of the Department of Justice. Originally founded in Chicago, the League grew to over 200,000 agents nationwide. The New York Division of this national organization of volunteer, untrained investigators was initiated on March 22, 1917.⁴ This episode is revealing of a transformation of American society in peacetime to a culture of voluntary vigilant community surveillance.

The pressures of war at home, including state obligation and sacrifice, prompted a society to allow and enforce changes within their communities. New ideals allowed many to view German-Americans as potential enemies and contributed to imposed and willing suppression within education and the arts. The Federal Government felt it necessary to authorize ordinary Americans to investigate other Americans. American citizens felt it necessary, as their obligation to the state during war, to volunteer their time in large numbers to combat disloyalty and espionage. In this case, Martha Martin felt no need to ask for credentials, but rather felt it her duty to help. The interaction between Page and Martin, and the experiences of German-Americans in New York, reveal the essence of the transformation of American society during the First World War that allowed certain infringements.

Page embodied the ideals of American vigilant voluntarism during the war, specific to the work or fight community engagement mentality.⁵ The situation of Martha Martin, and German-Americans more specifically during the war, exemplifies the broader ethnic tensions in early twentieth-century America as the pursuit of nation encompassed both racial and civic meanings

² *American Protective League New York Division Papers*, (University of Rochester, 1917-1919), D.419, Rare Books, Special Collections & Preservation.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Emerson Hough, *The Web* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1919), 36.

⁵ On wartime voluntarism and engagement, see Gerald E. Shenk, "*Work or Fight!*"; *Race, Gender, and the Draft In World War One* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

which were often contradictory to one another.⁶ The promise of such a nation allowed the chance for liberty for many, but also fear and intimidation for some.⁷ Indeed, at the turn of the century much of the basis for civic obligation rested on voluntarism, and during the war vigilant voluntarism. Any threat to the cohesion and power of the state proved reason enough for state sponsored investigations like the one evidenced through Page's testimony as he and others readily investigated the lives of their neighbors.

The wartime culture of acceptance represented through Page had its roots in wartime anxiety and xenophobia. Xenophobia not only contributed to the formation of the American Protective League (APL), but also to lobbying institutions like the American Defense Society (ADS), who pressured the government and citizens of the United States to remain steadfast through the war. The efforts of these organizations, along with rhetoric from government officials, helped craft what it meant to be an American during the war. The culture of organizations like the ADS and APL, and government rhetoric had debilitating effects on the German-American community. German-Americans were increasingly seen as un-American, as were their cultural institutions.

United States domestic wartime developments and the general culture of progressivism contributed to the rise in exclusivity. The Progressive Era American often believed that cooperation and teamwork and the ability of well-organized institutions led to progress both socially and economically.⁸ Wartime vigilant voluntarism allows for a case study in Progressive Era action and thought along the lines of community engagement during war, and what elements were deemed a threat to society. Though there was a relatively small group of German spies and saboteurs in the United States prior to the U.S. entry into the war, most German-Americans sought neutrality or supported the war effort. The anti-German fervor had debilitating effects, specifically in New York, on German-American literature, educational pursuits, and German-American cultural institutions. The German-American experience forced Americans "to understand how cultural practices meshed with political obligations".⁹ The war experience transformed American ideas about culture and political obligations, especially with regards to Americans engaged in the APL. What is missing is how deep this cultural transformation was in New York, and what the implications were for certain groups of Americans. How did German-Americans come to terms with their shifting obligations to the state in light of growing animosity toward their heritage?

The primary purpose of this study is to highlight various and complex ways Americans addressed issues of citizenship and obligation in New York at a time of changing obligations to the nation. Specifically, between 1916 and 1919, many in American society accepted new forms of citizenship and obligation based on wartime needs that rested on subjugating others like the American Protective League's "slacker raids" that sought to root out those who did not

⁶ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ Shenk, "*Work or Fight!*," 11.

⁹ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 20.

contribute to the war effort. Similarly, the head of the Iowa Council of Defense said that every person should join a patriotic society, similar to the APL, and denounce anyone who speaks of peace.¹⁰ The First World War contributed to a re-negotiation of cultural, social, and political obligations within New York. Similar circumstances surrounded German communities in other major cities. Many German-Americans in Philadelphia retracted from ethnic affiliations and toward new formulations of identity.¹¹ German-Americans largely felt it their obligation and duty to willingly self-suppress and adhere to the new standards of wartime Americanism.

A second aim of this paper is to add to the historical understanding of assimilation and citizenship during war more generally and contribute to the historiography on the United States home front within this context during the war. An advocate of the wartime draft saw military service as a way to “yank the hyphen” out of imperfectly assimilated immigrants.¹² Indeed, to be American in the early twentieth century was to assimilate and not reveal any ethnic cultural differences that would not mesh with the Progressive Era community. German-Americans and their fellow New Yorkers renegotiated what it meant to be American through the altering of the moral obligations of citizenship through vigilance societies, and the elimination of certain cultural institutions within the German-American community along with willing self-suppression. The myriad responses from the German-American community are evidence of the volatility of American wartime culture. War transforms notions of society and citizen regardless of time and place. The experience of German-Americans is not singular in American history. Wars have allowed unique circumstances to arise that have had significant consequences for ethnic groups. Exploring the history of war and xenophobia and the rhetoric that has fueled it may help one understand American nativism as a whole. This study is centered on the years 1916 to 1919. It aims to highlight anti-German nativism and the U.S. wartime experience during the First World War, bring the stories of German Americans in New York to life, and shed light on the long history of wartime anxiety.

The Roots of Wartime Anxiety

Wartime anxiety in the United States during the First World War had its roots in American nativism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Xenophobia was not a novel circumstance in 1917.¹³ The revolutions in Europe in 1848 brought many refugees to the United States from Germany. The influx of Europeans rekindled the largely anti-Catholic, anti-radical, Anglo-Saxon nativism.¹⁴ Right wing extremism largely achieved political pre-eminence with the emergence of the Know Nothing party in the mid-nineteenth century. According to the

¹⁰ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 68.

¹¹ Russell A. Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

¹² Kennedy, *Over Here*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 8–9.

Know Nothings, “A sense of danger” had struck the nation.¹⁵ Though the dangers at the time were Irish-Catholics, the primary ideas would permeate through the turn of the century. Nativism subsided, though not entirely, at the turn of the century. The resurgent xenophobia occurred around 1906 when immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe began settling in predominantly urban areas.¹⁶

To be sure, the nativism of the mid- to late-nineteenth century did not directly contribute to the anti-alienism of the First World War.¹⁷ It did however provide context to the rhetoric employed. What emerged during the war years was a militantly defensive nationalism. This is where wartime nativism differed from previous anti-alienism directed at German-Americans. Anti-alienism in the late nineteenth century focused primarily on anti-Catholicism, whereas the new brand of nativism during the war was directed at “an arm of the official enemy.”¹⁸

The arguments against German-Americans were very much steeped in terms of race and ethnicity. Progressive Era social experimentation heavily influenced new ways of conceptualizing race, especially in war, largely thinking in new terms of nationality rather than primarily the color of one’s skin.¹⁹ Combined with this new way of conceptualizing race was a messianic form of American nationalism and emergence of “100 percent Americanism.”²⁰ The First World War was also the height of progressivism as President Woodrow Wilson worked to create a model peacetime environment for returning veterans.²¹ Racial thinking and state progressive reform allowed many Americans a new way of thinking toward German-American institutions at a time when the war put Germans within the United States in the spotlight. The shift and escalation of public sentiment against German-American identity from 1914 to the outbreak of war in 1917 deserves attention.

The First World War had devastating consequences for the European population by 1917. The German offensive at Verdun, an attempt to bleed the French dry at a pivotal and symbolic location, culminated in five months of bitter fighting and casualties of over 600,000 French and German soldiers. The British offensive in the valley of the Somme River in 1916 ground to a halt after three months and claimed more than one million dead.²² Food shortages brought protesters, often across class lines, into the streets of Berlin.²³ The war made refugees of millions of citizens

¹⁵ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1.

¹⁶ Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 158–159.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁹ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America: 1900-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5.

²⁰ Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) 109-110.

²¹ Michael McGerr, *The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xvi.

²² Kennedy, *Over Here*, 4.

²³ Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

of the Russian Empire.²⁴ While Europe endured the harsh realities of war, German submarines continued to target American vessels crossing the Atlantic Ocean.²⁵ By 1917, Americans had been well aware of German submarine warfare. To add fuel to the flame, American newspapers published a telegram sent by German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman to the Mexican government proposing an alliance in a war against the United States. Though the question of war was divisive in the United States, Wilson successfully asked Congress for a declaration of war with Germany. German submarine warfare and the actions of Arthur Zimmerman were the catalysts for American entry into the war, though they were not the only contributing factors to wartime anxiety.

Wartime anxiety and vigilance in the United States during the First World War stemmed from real threats within American society. The threat within the borders was the German agent. Tracy Provost, in her study on German sabotage, outlines the two German espionage rings in the United States during the war. One was based in Washington under Franz von Papen and German Ambassador Graf von Bernstorff. The other centered on Franz von Rintelen, a German officer living in the United States. Funded by the German government, the espionage rings established fake companies to purchase and tie up war matériel from getting into the hands of the allies.²⁶ Other subversive activities included armed sabotage at the hands of a few agents. Primarily economic disasters, the explosions in New York Harbor and Kingsland, NY in 1916 and 1917 caused damage to war matériel in the millions of dollars. Investigations into the explosions found that German spies worked at the factory prior to the explosion, and the German government funded the sabotage.²⁷ The subversive activities on American soil contributed to growing anxiety toward German-Americans and provided the cognitive basis for American vigilance.

A Culture of Vigilance

A culture of vigilance emerged during the war years and was cultivated through official rhetoric and activities of public figures and organizations. These wartime political foundations had revealing implications for German-Americans. In his third State of the Union Address to a joint session of Congress on December 7, 1915, President Wilson brought official attention to the issue of disloyalty, encompassing enemy aliens and other supposedly subversive elements in society. In his address he stated, “There are citizens of the United States... born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws... who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life.” He continued that though “Their number is not great as compared with the whole number of those sturdy hosts... it is great enough to have brought deep disgrace upon us.” Wilson urged Congress to enact laws to deal with disloyalty. He

²⁴ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁵ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 6.

²⁶ Tracie Lynn Provost, “The Great Game: Imperial German Sabotage and Espionage against the United States, 1914-1917” (PhD diss., The University of Toledo, 2003), iv.

²⁷ “Find German Agents In Munition Works: Report Says Teutons Were Employed in Kingsland Plant Before Explosion,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1917; Provost, “The Great Game,” 16.

explained, “I am urging you to do nothing less than save the honor and self-respect of the nation. Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.”²⁸ Other prominent Americans lent their support against disloyalty. Deploring the use of hyphens to describe nationality, Theodore Roosevelt stated, “Some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them have come over. But when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name.”²⁹

Wilson and Roosevelt saw the activities surrounding German espionage as issues of national honor. Self-preservation of honor was a continued theme among official rhetoric and was also a predominant feature of right wing nativism that emphasized national superiority.³⁰ Speeches like Wilson’s State of the Union addressed this civic nationalism that resonated with Americans. In an effort to turn public opinion toward the war, the Wilson administration responded with an aggressive campaign of intimidation to root out opposition.³¹ Wilson’s campaign successfully alienated many Americans of German ancestry, providing context to a contested presidential election in 1916.

Correspondence records between New York resident Arthur von Briesen and Horace Brand, President of Illinois Publishing Company, reveal ethnic tensions already evident in 1916. Von Briesen was born in Germany in 1843 and settled in the United States in 1858. After serving in the First New York Volunteers during the Civil War, he studied law at New York University. Having founded the Legal Aid Society in 1876, he advocated for the poor and immigrant populations of New York providing free legal services.³² Von Briesen was of ailing health, suffering from old age, and was nearly blind at the outbreak of war.

Brand’s letters illustrate his unceasing efforts to urge von Briesen to take a firm political stance.³³ One letter largely deals with the Presidential election of 1916 between Republican Charles Evans Hughes and Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Through his speeches Wilson had alienated much of the German-American community. Support among German-Americans for Wilson was problematic. In contrast, Hughes’s platform called for strict neutrality.³⁴ German-Americans supported Hughes in large numbers in 1916. Subsequently, supporters of Wilson used this as an attack. An article in *The World* newspaper, one of Wilson’s largest supporters, read, “The followers of the Kaiser in the United States have set out to destroy President Wilson politically for the crime of being an American President instead of a German President. They have adopted Mr. Hughes as their candidate and made his cause their cause.”³⁵ Political support

²⁸ Woodrow Wilson, “Third Annual Message,” December 7, 1915, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29556>.

²⁹ Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), 69.

³⁰ Bennett, *The Paper of Fear*, 8.

³¹ Alan Brinkley, “Civil Liberties in Times of Crisis,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 59, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 27.

³² NYC Parks, “Von Briesen Park,” *Official Website of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation*, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/von-briesen-park/history>.

³³ Illinois Publishing Company was responsible for publishing various German-language newspapers.

³⁴ S.D. Lovell, *The Presidential Election of 1916* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 64.

³⁵ Lovell, *The Presidential Election of 1916*, 65.

from Americans of German descent was politically suspect and led to negative attention for Hughes.

Horace Brand appealed to Arthur von Briesen to garner support for Hughes in the election in New York. Von Briesen's response to Brand is revealing of the political implications on German-Americans because of the war. Von Briesen replied, "I apprehend, that if you put upon your campaign committee one or more German-Americans, that such an act will give the Democrats and their newspapers the chance they are looking for, namely, the opportunity of crying out that Mr. Hughes favors the German side."³⁶ Von Briesen had apprehensions about supporting a Presidential nominee. Still, many German-Americans actively supported Hughes in his Presidential run, which brought negative attacks against Hughes and revealed a stigma attached to the German-American community for openly voicing their political beliefs. In this instance the pressures of the First World War already had direct consequences for German-American political and social life. As the war and Wilson's rhetoric continued, American nativist groups organized and left their mark on the American population.

The American Protective League and the American Defense Society were established during the war and had direct implications for those they targeted. In a presidential cabinet discussion about German-American subversion on March 30, 1917, Attorney General Thomas Gregory gained support for a plan to use an organization of volunteers to gather information on suspected disloyalty for the Department of Justice. The result of this cabinet meeting was official approval to form the League.³⁷ The APL was active in multiple cities across the country. The Philadelphia Division examined 18,275 suspects between December 1917 and November 1918.³⁸ The New York Division incorporated over 4,500 "substantial business and professional men" and investigated "disloyal" agents in the state.³⁹

As the Department of Justice began supplying the League, other organizations looked to exploit the alleged disloyalty of German-Americans. Among the most powerful was the American Defense Society with Theodore Roosevelt serving as honorary president. The activities and publications of the American Defense Society are emblematic of a publication titled, "Throw out the German Language and All Disloyal Teachers." The publication read, "Any language which produces a people of ruthless conquistadors such as now exists in Germany, is not a fit language to teach clean and pure American boys and girls".⁴⁰ In a published appeal to the United States Government, the American Defense Society asked to "forbid the compulsory study of German in Public Schools" and to "forbid the publication of newspapers and magazines in the German language during the war." It concluded, "The American Defense Society is

³⁶ Arthur von Briesen, Letter to Horace Brand, July 24, 1916, Box 1, Folder 9, "Arthur von Briesen Papers; 1895-1929," Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library (Princeton University, 1929 1895).

³⁷ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 211-212.

³⁸ Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock*, 175.

³⁹ "American Protective League New York Division Report."

⁴⁰ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 215-216.

waging war against the enemy within our gates.”⁴¹ The rhetoric of the ADS played into existing anxieties brought about by the war. The printed by-laws of the Vigilance Corps of the American Defense Society reveals the importance placed upon public sentiment and its contribution to winning the war. The object of the group was to “arouse and organize all loyal Americans; to discover and expose every form of disloyalty; to promote the spirit of constructive patriotism and every enterprise that will assist in winning the war.”⁴² The undisclosed efforts of the American Protective League and the public campaigns of the American Defense Society combined to form a dual effort against disloyalty.

How widespread was this sentiment and how influential were the vigilant organizations during the war? Letters from ordinary Americans may lend answers to these questions. A letter from a New York librarian, Ms. Helen Hemmingway, to the Council of National Defense on September 16, 1918, questions the existence of the American Protective League, revealing the awareness of their investigative efforts. Her letter states, “We know so little about this organization that we are holding these communications until the question has been properly answered and by authorities.” She continues, “Will you kindly write me what you know about this league and what application one must make to enter it. This is one of the many questions we have been asked.”⁴³ There is no evidence whether the inquiries were based on suspicion of the APL or motivated by personal hopes of vigilant service. It is clear however that this semi-secretive organization had begun to be noticed by the public and some may have been looking for ways to join. The culture of vigilance during the First World War was evident and is revealed in the public pressures placed on various German institutions. Examination of the effects on German institutions clearly reveals the transformation of American society under the pressures of war and what it meant for an immigrant population.

Dropping the “Hun tongue”

On a slightly discolored piece of loose-leaf paper titled “Germanism of the City of New York and the Surrounding Area” dated June 12, 1912, Gustav Scholer, a prominent German-American resident and doctor in New York City, wrote down the names of the German-American societies of New York along with their various representatives. There were around 160 societies listed, which indicates that German-American cultural self-awareness in New York was very important and visible prior to the First World War.⁴⁴ The societies and their members, along with those in chapters in other cities, were targets of wartime vigilance and felt the pressures of wartime anxiety. Their various cultural pursuits, including German language newspapers and German language education among others, suffered during a time when being American had

⁴¹ “State Council of Defense Records: Correspondence Files” (Albany, New York, 1918 1917), A4234, New York State Archives.

⁴² “American Protective League New York Division Papers.”

⁴³ Letter to the Council of National Defense New York State Division, “State Council of Defense Records: Correspondence Files.”, New York State Archives.

⁴⁴ Gustav Scholer papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

little to do with anything German. The responses from German-Americans reveal a shift in how and why the German community either remained visible or did not. War, and wartime anxiety and vigilantism, directly impacted what it meant to be of German ancestry in the United States.

Individuals and organizations targeted German language publications. Before the war, there were 522 of such publications in the United States. According to Frederick Luebke, about forty-seven per cent disappeared by the end of 1919.⁴⁵ The American Defense Society was very active against newspapers it deemed un-American. The lobbying efforts against these newspapers are revealed in the multitude of letters exchanged between the ADS and the State Defense Council in Albany, NY. A typical letter read, “Thank you very much for your letter... in the matter of investigating newspapers and periodicals shown on the bulletin of the New York Public Library.” Not only were members of the ADS appealing to the government to suppress certain newspapers, but the library was also making the controversial nature of the newspapers public.⁴⁶ With the library being a public arena for discourse, the publicity of controversial newspapers contributed to negativity towards German-Americans.

Much of the animosity in New York was targeted at George Sylvester Viereck, editor and publisher of the *Fatherland* newspaper.⁴⁷ The *Fatherland* was marked by members of the ADS at the NYPL as a publication that contained “seditious articles”.⁴⁸ Many German-American newspapers were not as overtly nationalistic as Viereck’s periodical. Most encouraged neutrality and some editors chose to use their papers to encourage German-Americans to buy German war bonds or send money to the German Red Cross for civilian relief and relief for war widows and orphans.⁴⁹ With some exceptions, German language publications served as a cultural gathering of ideas and issues for an immigrant community looking to preserve heritage and navigate a new environment.

The spirit of war vigilance created hostile circumstances for German language education as well. The “Educational News and Editorial Comment,” published in the academic journal *The School Review*, shared contemporary debates in public education throughout the country. The June 1918 issue dealt with the question of German language education in public schools. The article referred to the position of the *North American Review*. It read, “It would be foolish to exclude German from the curriculum simply because we are at war with Germany. But in so far as German is retained, it should be regarded, treated, and taught as a foreign language, on par with other foreign languages.”⁵⁰ Not all publications were as judicious. The “Editorial Comment” also included a quote from the president of the American Defense Society as regarding most of the German newspapers in the U.S. as “insidiously disloyal.”⁵¹ The “Editorial Comment” explained the partial discontent with the attack on German language instruction,

⁴⁵ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 271.

⁴⁶ *New York State Defense Council*, Roll 3, “State Council of Defense Records: Correspondence Files,” New York State Archives, Albany, NY.

⁴⁷ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 91.

⁴⁸ *New York State Defense Council*, Roll 3.

⁴⁹ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 93–94.

⁵⁰ “Educational News and Editorial Comment,” *The School Review* 26, no. 6 (June 1, 1918): 457.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 458.

though also justified it. The issue stated, “Unquestionably the order prohibiting German as a foreign language in higher institutions is hysterical. It may be, however, difficult to discriminate, and for the period of the war, even if some schools and some teachers suffer, the less German, both press and instruction, the better.”⁵²

A German language instructor’s testimony is especially revealing of anti-German sentiment. The pressures of wartime anxiety directly affected the instructor. He fostered a strong German department at a Methodist college. Once the war came he felt that the “Germans had robbed me of something good and beautiful.” The article also refers to the efforts of the American Defense Society and how public influence played a role. The society had placed fourteen states on the “honor roll” for abolishing German language lessons, while sixteen other states “deliberated the subject.” To demonstrate how volatile the views of this subject were in New York, the author quotes Mr. L.A. Wilkins, the director of foreign language education in New York high schools. In June 1918, in an essay titled “Spanish in the High Schools” he wrote, “I would not for a moment disparage the study of French or German, nor belittle the treasures which a knowledge of these languages unfolds.” Only one month later, in July 1918, in a speech in Pittsburgh he changed his position. Wilkins said:

The German language, the German literature, German art, German universities, German science, German culture, and the entire German civilization have been vastly overrated here... We have had far too much teaching of German in our schools... and I personally believe that it was taught chiefly for the purpose of furthering propaganda originating in Berlin.⁵³

The Federal Government provided a symbolic safeguard against German language. The Smith Towner Act of 1918 established that no state could share in federal funds unless their official school instruction was in English.⁵⁴ The public pressure that encompassed the issue of German language instruction can be seen in a publication distributed by the ADS titled *Awake! America*. The rhetoric remains clear that anything to do with the German language was looked down upon. The section on teaching German read, “New York has voted to drop German from 52 elementary schools... Buffalo has not yet had the courage to drop the Hun tongue.”⁵⁵ German language education came under immense pressure and in many cases simply could not continue. In the spirit of the war, Progressive Era publicists held particular influence over the population, which helps explain the sudden shifts in sentiment toward the German language and press.⁵⁶ Wartime vigilance and anxiety as seen through the rhetoric of the ADS, the Smith Towner Act, and the language used by Wilkins, painted German language instruction as a threat to the

⁵² “Educational News and Editorial Comment,” 459.

⁵³ “Umschau,” *Monatshefte Für Deutsche Sprache Und Pädagogik* 19, no. 10 (December 1, 1918): 274. The article was printed in German and is produced in this paper from my own translation.

⁵⁴ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 312.

⁵⁵ William T. Hornaday and American Defense Society, *Awake! America. Object Lessons and Warnings* (New York, Moffat, Yard & company, 1918), 81.

⁵⁶ For more on Progressive Era publicists, see John A. Thompson. *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

upbringing of American children. To be American was not to speak or read German in any context.

Wartime culture proved detrimental to other cultural institutions in New York City as well. An article in the *New York Tribune* in March 1918 quoted the American Defense Society stating that German music is “one of the most dangerous forms of German propaganda because it appeals to the emotions and has power to sway an audience as nothing else can.” That fall the Metropolitan Opera in New York dropped composers and operas because they were of German origin, “Including several Americans singing only Wagner.” The opera replaced these acts with performers from other countries like “a French star of rising reputation and three Italians.”⁵⁷ The public pressure exemplified in the efforts of the ADS rippled through German-American institutions and assaulted various cultural establishments including language education, publications, and the arts. Americans faced new notions of obligation to the state and the German-American community had to reconcile their position in the vastly changing circumstances of public life.

“A Revolution in the Public Mind:” German-Americans of New York

Despite animosity and vigilant activity towards their institutions, many German-Americans responded by adapting their cultural and civic practices to meet Americanized wartime standards. For example, the National German-American Alliance (NGAA) asked for their members to express patriotism and meet every responsibility imposed by citizenship. Most other ethnic German organizations tried to remain unnoticed. One German-American society in New York offered its shooting range to the War Department.⁵⁸ Some German-American churches expressed their loyalty by severing ties to Germany, but refused to stop service in German.⁵⁹ They did not equate patriotic service with modifying their use of the German language. The varying responses from the German-American community are revealing of how volatile the wartime culture was and how individuals adapted to new obligations to the state.

Henry Weismann, President of the New York Chapter of the German-American Alliance, shared in the eagerness of the NGAA to prove German-American loyalty to the United States. The September 1917 edition of the *New York Times Magazine* featured a plea regarding ethnic and national loyalties. He explained that during the course of this war, language must be employed to “reiterate the splendid Americanism of the citizenship of German stock.”⁶⁰ The employment of loyal rhetoric in a national magazine must not have been sufficient. Only months later Weismann proposed, and it was unanimously agreed upon by the eighty-six societies represented, that there would be no state convention for the German-American Alliance in New

⁵⁷ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 249.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁹ Leubke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 233.

⁶⁰ “Henry Weismann on German-American’s Duty: When the United States Went Into War, He Says, It Was Time to Forget the Fatherland,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1917, sec. The New York Times Magazine.

York in 1918. Weismann's reasoning was revealing. He stated, "In ordinary times our contributions were welcomed by all, but the war has caused a revolution in the public mind."⁶¹

If Weissman hints at the anxieties of the German-American community, Gustav Scholer offers a glimpse of the effects on the individual. Scholer was a prominent American citizen of New York City. Born in Germany, he immigrated to the United States in the 1880s. He was a doctor and served on the board at Manhattan State Hospital where he practiced psychiatry. When the war began, Scholer volunteered his medical expertise. He was also very active in German-American societies and civic organizations. Examination into Scholer's life is important because he spent most of his time on matters relating to the hospital, yet the effects of wartime anxiety are still evident in his letters. He was an unbiased observer of the changing climate of war.

Correspondence records to and from Scholer and his contemporaries reveal German-American anxieties that stemmed from wartime xenophobia and attempts to negotiate wartime nativism. One letter, dated April 20, 1917, explains the decision made for German societies to refrain from certain activities. It read:

By request from the police department in order that there may be no trouble at gatherings of Germans in this city the following motion was adopted: To ask German societies and organizations of this city to refrain from outings in a body; to avoid singing in public places of such songs which may cause trouble and disorder... No signs and banners which may cause irritation should be displayed. The Public Committee be requested to spread the above resolutions in German daily papers.⁶²

Many German societies willingly suppressed their daily activities to avoid conflict. There were various responses to situations like the one in which Scholer found himself. Like Scholer, Professor Kuno Francke of Harvard sympathized with Germany's efforts, but found it dangerous to organize on any ethnic basis because it may foster "hatred instead of sympathy."⁶³

German-Americans consciously tried to prove their loyalty to the United States. A letter from Ludwig Nissen to Scholer explains this dynamic. The letter explains an appeal to all German-American societies to take part in the Independence Day parade on July 4, 1918. He stressed the importance of participation and "cooperation of every true-hearted American, man or woman, of German blood... It is particularly desired that practically every organization of former Germans shall be represented." Nissen expressed his desire for the American press to read on the day after July 4, "There is no longer such thing as a German slacker, shirker or doubter; their Americanism is of the purest."⁶⁴ The Americanism of German-Americans was only going to be proven by the attendance of "practically every organization." Nissen's letter

⁶¹ "New York Alliance Quits: Henry Weismann Says German Americans Will Be Patriots," *New York Times*, April 13, 1918.

⁶² Gustav Scholer papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. Many of Scholer's letters are my own translations from German, however some were also written in English. The letters are a significant picture of the personal feelings and anxieties of the German-American community.

⁶³ Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 123–124.

⁶⁴ Letter from Ludwig Nissen to Gustav Scholer, "Gustav Scholer papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library."

was particularly telling because he referred to those in the German-American organizations as “former Germans” rather than German-Americans. Nissen intended for his ethnic community to reveal their connection to the state and the war effort. Explaining his motives to Scholer, he potentially attempted to reaffirm the assimilation of Germans by referring to them as “former Germans.” Not only was the American mind revolutionized during war, but the German-American mind was as well.

The First World War substantially transformed German-American identity. Immense pressure was put on German-American institutions forcing Americans of German descent to alter and question their activities, while consciously expressing their patriotism. This state of being had indirect social and political implications for the German-American community.

Conclusion: “A Kaleidoscopic Pageant”

The First World War affected the German-American community in many ways that reveal implications of ethnicity, obligations to the state, and citizenship during war. The experiences of individual German-Americans like Gustav Scholer and Arthur von Briesen are emblematic of the German community as a whole, as wartime circumstances slowly disintegrated German social and cultural institutions, specifically in New York City. Wartime anxiety, brought on by a relatively small German espionage effort along with official rhetoric, produced a new culture of vigilance. This wartime culture of vigilance produced organizations like the American Protective League and the American Defense Society, which investigated the lives of ordinary Americans of German descent and put enormous public pressure on German-American institutions. The government authorization of the APL and the public campaigns of the ADS were important actions that contributed to the overall war culture in New York State in particular, and the United States as a whole.

The public pressure inflicted by wartime vigilance and anxiety, along with official anti-German rhetoric, reverberated through the German-American community. Cultural institutions like German language newspapers, German language programs, and German cultural societies were marked as insidiously disloyal and vastly diminished in numbers after the war. German-Americans were increasingly reluctant to engage in ethnic activities and outings. The NGAA held a meeting on April 11, 1918. The executive council voted to disband the organization.⁶⁵ Two days later, Henry Weismann dissolved the New York Chapter of the Alliance. Weismann wrote in a statement to members:

Letters will be sent tomorrow to all local branches urging them to go [sic] of our existence as German-American organizations and to become patriotic societies, working for the Liberty Loan and educating

⁶⁵ Charles Thomas Johnson, *Twilight: The National German-American Alliance, 1901-1918* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 157.

people to justice of America's cause... We felt that the name of the organization laid it open to unjust charges that it lacked patriotism and favored our enemies.⁶⁶

The last order by the council of the National German-American Alliance was a vote to turn over the remaining \$30,000 in the treasury to the American Red Cross to aid U.S. soldiers in the final months of war against Germany.⁶⁷

German-American responses to the culture of wartime anxiety and vigilance varied. The letters of Arthur von Briesen reveal the political implications of wartime anxiety on Americans of German descent. The NGAA expressed American patriotism while offering their shooting range for government use. Groups of German-Americans put their patriotism on display at the July 4 parade in New York City. The parade that took place was reported in the *New York Times* as a "kaleidoscopic pageant" and a "land of many bloods but of one ideal."⁶⁸ The article referred to many nationalities who took part including descendants from Italy, France, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Belgium. Germany, though well represented, was not mentioned in the article. Many Germans remained dismayed, as was the case with Theodore Ladenburger, the German merchant who had been living in the United States for twenty-five years and, when the war came, dealt with "hurtful and pernicious ostracism as a traitor." Gustav Scholer explained that some German societies were pressured to refrain from singing certain songs or from outings in a large body.

The war at home revealed vulnerability within American society, but also crafted what it meant to be American in time of war. Vigilance as an obligation of citizenship has been a political practice in which groups like the American Protective League utilize collective policing for community defense.⁶⁹ The wartime experience forced Americans to understand how cultural practices meshed with political obligations, specifically regarding race and ethnicity.⁷⁰ In particular, New Yorkers negotiated political obligations through community defense and self-censorship.

This study conveys one geographical image of social and cultural change in wartime America. It gives voice to Americans of German descent who came face to face with a changing and anxious American public steeped in Progressive Era notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality. It reveals how German-Americans re-created their own obligations to the state in return. Henry Weismann perceived a revolution in the public mind of the modern American. Perhaps the German-American mind was revolutionized as well, leading to a growing acceptance of lost liberties for the sake of community defense. The circumstances of the First World War made it possible for the public to conceive of subjugating minorities for the security of the state, and made it probable that it could happen again. War transformed notions of citizenship and

⁶⁶ "New York Alliance Quits: Henry Weismann Says German-Americans Will Be Patriots," *New York Times*, April 13, 1918.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Twilight*, 157.

⁶⁸ "Day-Long Pageant Pictures America United For War," *New York Times*, July 5, 1918.

⁶⁹ Christopher Capozzola, "The Only Badge Needed Is Your Patriotic Fervor: Vigilance, Coercion, and the Law in World War I America," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (March 2002): 1356.

⁷⁰ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 20.

obligation, and would do so again in twenty years, forcing Americans to renegotiate once again the terms of their relationship to the state and to one another.

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