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# CULTURE, COERCION, AND PATRIOTISM: THE GERMAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN SAN FRANCISCO DURING WORLD WAR I

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ON July 15, 1914, a German naval cruiser, the *Nürnberg*, sailed from Mexican waters into the port of San Francisco. That evening, fifteen of the ship's officers attended a banquet joined by San Francisco Mayor James Rolph and sixty prominent San Francisco Germans at the Saint Francis Hotel, to toast the Kaiser, President Woodrow Wilson, and the *Nürnberg*. The following day the front page of the *California Staats-Zeitung* read, "City representatives and Germans warmly welcome the cruiser *Nürnberg*" and featured a picture of the warship and its captain, Commander von Schönberg. Over the following days, local German organizations like the German singing society and the German-American League of San Francisco entertained and celebrated the ship's officers and crew, sang the German national anthem and the "Star Spangled Banner," and exchanged toasts of friendship between the two nations in what the *San Francisco Chronicle* summarized as a "brilliant reception." Three weeks later, American-German relations splintered as Germany became embroiled in war with England, France, and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is an examination of a period when international affairs had radical domestic impact. The First World War and the perceived belligerence of the German Empire produced a domestic hysteria against German Americans. A broad cross-section of Americans attacked their patriotism and loyalty and sought to restrict and marginalize their culture. Such widespread hatred directed against them was something entirely new to most of the German population. Since colonial times, German immigrants and German Americans had been one of the most diverse and influential non-English speaking ethnic groups in the U.S. Often viewed as a desirable immigrant group, Germans integrated into

<sup>1</sup> *California Staats-Zeitung*, 16 July 1914, 1; *ibid.*, 23 July 1914, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 July 1914, 1; *ibid.*, 18 July 1914, 1.

multiple spheres and made numerous contributions to American culture and way of life. Yet, from 1914 to 1918, as the war became a polarizing and contentious political issue, German Americans were looked upon with increased suspicion by their friends, neighbors, and coworkers. World War I thus marked a drastic change in the relations between German immigrants and the American public, yet this period has received limited treatment by historians.

This study seeks to recover the experience of San Francisco German Americans during the First World War and the ways in which this prominent immigrant group responded to a climate of heightened nativism and ethnocentrism. Employing a comparative methodology, this essay first places San Francisco Germans into an historical and geographical context, and follows with a discussion of the ways that many in the German community responded to the outbreak of the European war. The war is periodized into two distinct phases: the period of American neutrality from August 1914 to March 1917, and the United States entrance into the war in April 1917 through its conclusion in November 1918. The division illuminates both the fluctuating attitudes of American citizens towards German immigrants and German-American attitudes towards the war and its supporters. Layered throughout the study is an examination of San Francisco's German-language press, especially the weekly *California Staats-Zeitung* newspaper, assessing the degree to which editorial content is consistent with the findings presented by scholars of the German-language press. This study also addresses the wartime activities of German Americans and their interactions with like-minded groups, specifically Irish Americans who shared similar political views. Finally, at the height of anti-German hysteria, this essay seeks to understand the role of government in fomenting the crisis, to identify the patriotic organizations that operated in the Bay Area, and to assess the impact felt by the German-American community.

From 1914–1918, the experience of San Francisco Germans and citizens of German descent mirrored the wartime experiences of urban German-American populations around the country. During the period of American neutrality, San Francisco Germans demonstrated their support for the Fatherland, advocated strict American neutrality, and simultaneously proclaimed their loyalty to the U.S., while disapproving of President Wilson's foreign policy. Such disapproval manifested itself in state-level action to defeat Wilson in the 1916 presidential campaign. The central importance of the 1916 election for California Germans was not Wilson's reelection, but Governor Hiram Johnson's election to the Senate. Johnson's successor, William Stephens, quickly succumbed to the fervor of war preparedness. Once war against Germany was declared, San Francisco Germans became supporters, if only reluctantly, of America's

war mobilization. Through the end of 1918, German-American citizens endured a climate of fear and persecution influenced by state and national level propaganda campaigns that ultimately compelled the German community to dismantle many of their ethnic institutions, and for some, even shed their ethnic identities.

Carl Wittke's 1936 study, *German-Americans and the World War*, was one of the first major works that attempted to understand the domestic war experience of German Americans. The monograph grew out of Wittke's interest in the fate of Ohio's German-language press during the war. Wittke sought to uncover what happened to "one of our most important immigrant groups in a time of crisis when racial and national characteristics were naturally accentuated."<sup>2</sup> Wittke delivered a critical, new understanding of the war period with his argument that for the German element, the war "initiated a period of emotional crisis, conflicts of loyalties, misunderstandings, persecutions, tragedy which few of their fellow citizens appreciated."<sup>3</sup> German Americans were put in the difficult position of having to defend their names and decency before their neighbors and fellow citizens.

Wittke's study was vitally important to the historiography of World War I on the home front. *German-Americans and the World War* revealed the conflicted feelings of German Americans who at once sympathized with their kin in the Fatherland but remained loyal to their new country. At the outset of the war, America's major newspapers reported the Allied, pro-British version of the war, which many German Americans felt was influenced, if not infiltrated, by Britain's elaborate propaganda channels. The editors of the German-language press launched a counter-offensive to present an opposing point of view. Hoping to mitigate the country's budding anti-German sentiment, they justified the German course of war, criticized America's war-profiteering "Dollar Kultur," and debunked the tales of atrocity committed by German soldiers. America's entry into the war in 1917 however, forced the German-language press to transition to a position of loyalty to the U.S. government. Facing heightened scrutiny, the newspapers praised American military achievements and supported government programs for financing the war. Americans of German descent did not approve of the war, but accepted it and decided to see it through.

If the German-language press was the unofficial voice of German Americans during the neutrality period, then the National German-

<sup>2</sup> Carl Wittke, *German-Americans and the World War (With Special Emphasis on Ohio's German Language Press)* (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1936), xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

American Alliance (NGAA) was their main political organ. In *The German-Americans in Politics: 1914-1917*, Clifton James Child traces the history and political activities of the alliance and how they related to wider national issues as political loyalties became conflicted and intolerance mounted. Founded in Pennsylvania in 1901, the NGAA was primarily a cultural organization that promoted the use of the German tongue, emphasized German contributions to American history, and assisted new arrivals with obtaining citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Child contends that the alliance arose out of peculiarly American conditions and sharpened its political teeth in the fight over prohibition. The outbreak of war combined with German-American sympathy for the Fatherland contributed to a heightened tension that ultimately “resolved itself into a more specific antagonism between the organization and the administration, culminating in attempts to destroy Wilson politically in 1916.”<sup>5</sup>

*The German-Americans in Politics* is a valuable contribution to understanding the political vantage point of many German Americans during the neutrality period. In the 1910s, the alliance’s outspoken leadership, failure to condemn German militarism, and coordinated attempts to keep the United States on a path of neutrality disabled the group from gaining the support of an American public which widely perceived them as serving Berlin’s interests. Originally non-partisan, the alliance threw its support behind the Republican candidate Charles Evans Hughes in the 1916 election, a blunder that marked the climax of their political activity and led to a congressional investigation in the spring of 1918 that became the organization’s death knell. Child’s work, however, is flawed both by his assumption that the political views of the NGAA were representative of German immigrants nationwide, and by his overestimation of the organization’s membership and actual political strength.

The 1974 publication of Frederick Luebke’s *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* marked the first attempt at a synthesis of existing works. Luebke grapples with the question of why “American society lashed out at its German element during World War I,” and finds that the crisis of war transformed latent tensions, rooted in decades of cultural and social interactions with German immigrants, into outright hostility.<sup>6</sup> Luebke’s work stressed the heterogeneity of German Americans. He recognized that leadership sources, on which prior histories

<sup>4</sup> Clifton J. Child, *The German-Americans in Politics, 1914-1917* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1939), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), xiii-xvi.

relied extensively, reflected opinions that were not necessarily consistent with the attitudes of citizens of German origin at large. Immigrants settled in both rural and urban regions but also came from multiple German states and principalities with deep religious, linguistic, cultural, and political variations. The German immigrants expressed their interests in a broad network of religious and ethnic associations. Depending on the institutions with which they affiliated, German Americans reacted to the war in different ways. Ultimately, Luebke concludes, the intolerance of war both dismantled and demoralized ethnic associational structures and thus, “had the effect of accelerating the assimilation of most German-American groups” that could no longer retreat into ethnocentric shells.<sup>7</sup>

The works of Wittke, Child, and Luebke lay an important foundation upon which to understand the German-American experience during the First World War. The authors’ assessments of the political, cultural, and social dimensions provide valuable conclusions about the experience of America’s largest immigrant group, and each offers a carefully measured interpretation of public reaction. A review of these secondary works, however, reveals a gap in the historiography. The core studies focus primarily on German communities in the Midwest and on the East Coast, although Wittke, Child, and Luebke do indicate that California contained an active German-American population that suffered similar wartime realities as the broader population. Overall, however, German immigrants on the West Coast are sparsely mentioned, typically in anecdotes describing an episode of harassment.

A review of some population figures is useful to understand the distribution of German immigrants and their offspring, both nationally and in California. The census of 1910 reports that of the nearly 92 million United States residents recorded, about 2.5 million were born in Germany. When one includes the second generation, the number of residents of German descent exceeds eight million, which made the Germans the most numerous ethnic group in the country. German settlement patterns, however, were not evenly distributed; 85 percent of Germans settled in the Middle Atlantic States and in the Midwest.<sup>8</sup>

The 1910 federal census revealed that California’s 76,307 German-born residents ranked the state eleventh in the total number of German-born, right behind Missouri, but by far the highest number and concentration on the Pacific coast. Collectively, first and second generation Germans totaled 206,382 persons or 8.6 percent of the total population of

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910. Population (1913)*, 1:804, 805, Census Statistics; Luebke, 30.

California, making them the largest immigrant population in the state. San Francisco's 416,912 residents made it the most populous city in California, and 59,401 of those inhabitants were born either in Germany or had German parentage. They comprised 14.2 percent of the total population and were the city's largest ethnic group. Among the second generation, 10,511 had at least one foreign-born parent, and 24,753 had both parents born in the Fatherland. Consequently, San Francisco offers a compelling opportunity to study German Americans on the West Coast.<sup>9</sup>

Germans in California have a history that dates back to the gold rush. As early as the 1850s, they had established German-language newspapers devoted to varying points of view. Some of the first publications included the *California Demokrat*, and its offshoot, the *California Staats-Zeitung* (State Newspaper), the *San Francisco Journal*, and later, the *Abendpost* (Evening Post). San Francisco Germans also published newspapers with political and religious viewpoints such as the social-democratic *San Francisco Tageblatt* (Daily Leaf), and the Catholic *Californischer Volksfreund* (People's Friend). The immigrant press performed multiple functions. Foreign language newspapers carried news from abroad that kept immigrants in touch with their homeland and also promoted activities and interests in their new home. Partly as a matter of self-preservation, the press promoted the retention of the native tongue, for when the language began to die out in the second generation, so did the press. During the First World War, the *California Staats-Zeitung* was thus typical of immigrant newspapers of the day and became an important primary source for the *weltanschauung* (worldview) of San Francisco's German population.<sup>10</sup>

Germans arrived in America with far greater regional, cultural, and religious complexity than was perceived by the average American. Luebke identified two distinct types of German groups, the first of which he called the *Kirchendeutschen*—the church Germans. The religion of German immigrants was typically determined by their region of origin. Church Germans could be Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Methodist, or Jewish, and they shared a deep commitment to the religious values of their particular denomination. In early 1900s San Francisco, one could identify several German Lutheran churches, two German Roman Catholic Churches, and several Baptist, Evangelical, and Methodist houses of worship as well as a sizable German-Jewish population. Luebke

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census*, 2:157-174.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 2-4, 100, 178, 234, and 273. This and Wittke's World War I study remain the best resources on German-language newspapers printed in the United States.

dubbed the second group the *Vereindeutschen*, or the club Germans. In contrast to the more conservative church Germans, members of the German clubs tended to hold secular values and attitudes. In 1910, multiple German clubs flourished in San Francisco. Organizations such as the Schwaben Club, the North German Society, the charitable German General Benevolent Society, the *Maennerchor* (Men's Choir), the *Turnverein* (gymnastics club), the *Schuetzen Verien* (shooting club), and fraternal organizations such as the Order of Hermann's Sons, provided a diverse network for German immigrants in which they could interact and socialize.<sup>11</sup>

The club Germans promoted German culture, thought, and values in their activities inside and outside of their meeting halls. In August 1901, the San Francisco German community erected a bronze statue in Golden Gate Park memorializing two of the Fatherland's most revered men of letters, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. The statue was a reproduction of one originally erected in the German city of Weimar in 1857, and replicas could also be found in Cleveland and Milwaukee. The inscription at the rear of the statue reads "Dedicated to the city of San Francisco by citizens of German descent of California in the year nineteen hundred and one," making the statue a point of pride for the city and the local German community, and illustrating their connection to and reverence for German cultural icons.<sup>12</sup>

Like most ethnic groups, German Americans developed community institutions in their places of settlement. German immigrants opened one of the pioneer banking institutions in San Francisco with the creation of the German Savings and Loan Society in 1868, which became popular among Germans and locals alike. In addition to their headquarters in the Financial District, by 1910, the German Savings and Loan Society had opened additional branches in the city's Richmond and Mission districts.<sup>13</sup> In 1878, the German General Benevolent Society funded the construction of the German Hospital located at Castro and

<sup>11</sup> Luebke, 34–44; *Crocker-Langley San Francisco Directory* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Company, 1910).

<sup>12</sup> Goethe-Schiller Denkmal Gesellschaft, *Erinnerungen an Den "Deutschen Tag" Der California Midwinter International Exposition, 1894, An Das "Goethe-Schiller Fest," 1895 Und an Die "Enthüllung Des Denkmals" Im Golden Gate Park, 1901* (San Francisco: Goethe-Schiller Denkmal Gesellschaft, 1902); *New York Times*, 25 August 1901.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin C. Wright, *Banking in California: 1849–1910* (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker Company, 1910), 32, 36, and 147, <http://books.google.com/books?id=P9IJA AAAIAAJ>.

Duboce Street.<sup>14</sup> German breweries, bakeries, and butcher shops could also be found throughout the city.

Working-class Germans also played a role in the labor politics of San Francisco. San Francisco held a local German chapter of the Socialist Party. German Americans were also involved in local union organizations, with one notable example being the German tradition of union organization in the brewing industry. In 1887, San Francisco brewery workmen joined the National Brewers Union, and later organized under labor leader Alfred Fuhrmann's United Brewery Workmen of the Pacific Coast. Workers read the nationally distributed *Brauer-Zeitung* (Brewers Newspaper) and coalesced together against exploitation by "brewery capitalists." In 1910, Hermann Schlüter, a contemporary leading scholar of the labor and socialist movements, found that San Francisco had about 1,200 organized brewery workers who enjoyed, perhaps, the best pay and conditions of all brewery workers in the country.<sup>15</sup>

At the dawn of the First World War in August 1914, German Americans in San Francisco maintained a visible presence in the city. German Americans had created their own political, social, and cultural institutions to sustain their communities and maintain their language. These institutions often reached out to, or were in communication with communities at the national level, as part of what historian Roger Daniels described as the "largest cultural apparatus of any American immigrant group."<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, German Americans thrived in many arenas of San Francisco. The multi-ethnic city prided itself on its tradition of tolerance, albeit tolerance limited to white groups.

Yet at the national level, German-American displays of cultural nationalism, labor activism, and overall success at integrating into American society planted the roots of a cultural clash between the German element and the dominant American culture. Marxist philosophies brought by German immigrants following the 1848 revolutions vexed American capitalists throughout the nineteenth century and aroused suspicions of German radicalism, particularly socialism and anarchism. Since 1870, the military and economic challenge posed by Imperial Germany and the autocratic figure of Kaiser Wilhelm II had concerned American leaders. Combined with resurgent nativism that reemerged in

<sup>14</sup> For a brief history and timeline of the building of the German hospital and the incarnations it took, see the website of the California Pacific Medical center: <http://www.cpmc.org/about/history/timeline.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Schlüter, *The Brewing Industry and the Brewery Workers' Movement in America* (Cincinnati: International Union of United Brewery Workmen of America, 1910; New York: B. Franklin, 1970), 175, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 64.

response to the waves of immigration of southern and eastern Europeans in the late 1800s, by the 1910s the elements for a backlash were in place.<sup>17</sup>

### The Neutrality Period (1914–1916)

The crisis that erupted in Europe in August 1914 was devastating to Americans of German descent. Many still had close friends and relatives in the old country, and though they often demonstrated immense pride in their cultural heritage, historians agree that German Americans professed their loyalty to America first. Yet during the period of American neutrality from 1914–1916, German Americans in San Francisco clearly supported the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Their experience was not at variance from the national pattern; the war became a source of unity and revitalization as German Americans rallied to support the Fatherland in its war against the Allied Forces of England, France, and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

The onset of war had an immediate effect on the content of the German-language press. On August 6, 1914, the *California Staats-Zeitung* published a cable received by the German Consulate in San Francisco from the office of the Kaiser. The printed cable, with the heading “Germany’s Sons Called Up,” informed all readers of the mobilization of the imperial army and navy and ordered all reserve military to report at once to the nearest military office for inspection. This marked one of the few times that the German language press was used to channel official declarations of the Kaiser to its readers. Below, a local German, George F. Wolfmann, explained that the European situation was serious for California. Wolfmann reasoned that because peaceful means had failed, “the Kaiser recognized the time has come to use weapons of force. I am sure that France will be beaten,” but warned, “there is hope England will not interfere, because through interference nobody can win.” The opinion betrayed the sentiment that many German Americans felt. The Kaiser’s reasons for war were just, and there was faith in the ability of the German army to emerge victorious.<sup>19</sup>

The war in Europe gave the German-language press a new duty, to present the German viewpoint of the war in a country where it was believed the national headlines were dominated by English propaganda that unfairly vilified the Fatherland.<sup>20</sup> German Americans were particularly offended by the portrayal of Germans as Huns, and German soldiers

<sup>17</sup> Luebke, 76–78.

<sup>18</sup> La Vern J. Rippley, *The German-Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 180.

<sup>19</sup> “Alle Soehne Einberuf,” *California Staats-Zeitung*, 6 August 1914, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Wittke, *German-Americans in the World War*, 7.

as baby-killers. Johann Witten, a Washington farmer who visited San Francisco for the Panama Pacific Exposition, wrote to his brother in Germany in December 1915, that the “English newspapers poison our people with all sorts of lies. The real truth is kept from our country.”<sup>21</sup> Like Witten, many German speakers turned to the German-language press to present an alternative report of what went on in the war, even though the German version was often as one-sided as the English.

While the blood of Europe’s warriors stained the soil of the continent, in August 1915 San Francisco German Americans simultaneously showed their support for Germany, pledged their allegiance to the United States, and promoted their culture during a convention of Dr. Charles J. Hexamer’s National German-American Alliance that coincided with the Panama Pacific International Exposition. Several days of Alliance meetings yielded the adoption of various resolutions of concern to German America. They condemned the pro-British press, and appealed to all newspapers for unbiased reporting. The Alliance further reiterated their opposition to prohibition and personal liberty laws, an opposition they viewed as, “one of the principal doctrines of German-American idealism.” The Alliance also sent an open letter to President Wilson that critiqued the president’s handling of the war, declaring:

The events of the last year have shown that the English point of view predominates public opinion in America to an alarming degree. As citizens of this country we therefore deem it our duty to maintain American independence and principles. The fact that we are of German birth and descent and not subject to English influence, enables us to champion the absolute independence of our Republic. To maintain American independence we deem our historic mission.<sup>22</sup>

Couched in the rhetoric of American constitutional rights, the letter further demanded full equality and an unwillingness to accept second-place status in public life due to their descent.

The event featured several distinguished speakers including Alliance president Dr. Hexamer, the German Consul in San Francisco Franz Bopp, California Governor Hiram Johnson, Congressman Julius Kahn, and San Francisco mayor James Rolph. Hiram Johnson pronounced, “we are all of us of one great Nation here . . . and it does not detract one whit from our worth as citizens to look back with pride and affection to the lands from

<sup>21</sup> Johann Witten to his brother, 5 December 1915, quoted in Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., *Briefe aus Amerika, News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, trans. Susan Carter Vogel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 279, 280.

<sup>22</sup> “Hot Letter to Wilson Modified,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 August 1915, 1.

which we came, or in which our forefathers had their origin." Julius Kahn was met with cheers in his declaration that Germans in America were, "ready to die for the United States of America, if need be." Hexamer and others recounted the numerous contributions German immigrants had made to American society. An estimated 35,000 supporters paraded through the city, a contingent that included veterans of the German army, the local German clubs, and a regiment of Irish volunteers. The festivities were capped with the unveiling of a new Beethoven statue in Golden Gate Park, presented to the city by the New York City Beethoven Men's Choir.<sup>23</sup>

The bombastic spectacle gave critics of German Americans plenty of ammunition with which to question their loyalty. The front page of the August 3, 1915 *San Francisco Examiner* featured two young girls gleefully posing in front of the German Iron Cross. Both leading San Francisco papers published the original draft of the open letter to Wilson, which blamed U.S. leaders for the sinking of the *Lusitania*, condemned American foreign policy, and concluded, "the country demands that you restore to it what it has lost—its reputation, its honor and its fair and unsullied name." The harsh wording of the letter nearly split the Alliance.<sup>24</sup> One patriotic reader, writing under the name "American," wrote to the *San Francisco Chronicle* strongly rejecting the Alliance's position and wondered, "What would happen to an American society in Germany if it dared to send a communication of this sort to the Kaiser?" He continued, "there is too much liberty given in this country to foreigners . . . they have no right to criticize our Government."<sup>25</sup> Outspoken protests against Wilson's conduct of the war clearly earned San Francisco's German sympathizers negative attention from some of the public and press, which began to show signs that German-American behavior transgressed the accepted parameters of political discourse.

German Americans found an ally in the San Francisco Irish population. Both groups disliked England, opposed prohibition, and agitated for strict American neutrality. In writing about a five-day German War Relief Bazaar in May 1916, the Irish-American newspaper, *The Leader*, praised "the spontaneity with which the Teutonic societies of San Francisco . . . and the entire State have rallied to the cause" of raising money for the "wounded widows and orphans of the Central Powers."<sup>26</sup> In 1916, Ger-

<sup>23</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 August 1915 through 7 August 1915.

<sup>24</sup> *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 August 1915; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 August 1915; Charles Thomas Johnson, *Culture at Twilight: The National German-American Alliance, 1901–1918* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 113–114.

<sup>25</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 August 1915, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *The Leader*, 22 April 1916, 7. The article indicates that Governor Johnson was expected to appear as an honorary chairman on a special day called "State Day."

mans celebrated St. Patrick's Day alongside the Irish, underneath the Stars and Stripes and the Irish and German flags, "sharing in common a hatred of their common foe, the British Imperial Government."<sup>27</sup> Two months later, *The Leader* articulated the Irish position, linking the Irish independence movement with the war, and clarified that "the Irish have not entered this fray out of sympathy for the German cause, but because they could serve Irish freedom best."<sup>28</sup>

The San Francisco chapter of the American Independence Union, one of the nation's wartime isolationist groups, also voiced dissent. The organization was formed in January 1915 by German Americans convening in Washington D.C., and its membership was restricted to American citizens whose primary loyalty was to the United States. They engaged in propaganda activity that supported an embargo on arms shipments and strict neutrality to keep America "free from commercial, financial, and political subservience to foreign powers."<sup>29</sup> The American Independence Union of California began publishing the *American Independent* in December 1915 under the auspices of its chapter president, local lawyer Daniel O'Connell, and German editor A. D. Bauer. The sheet was largely a propaganda organ that declared itself the "Only Pro-American Paper in the United States," and argued that any sensible citizen "must feel humiliated in realizing that America has become practically, if not officially, a British colony."<sup>30</sup> The pages of the newspaper were littered with information about valiant German war victories, anti-British propaganda, passages that glorified Irish nationalism, and statements of loyalty from Irish and German Americans.

Exhortations by German-American leaders and newspaper editors, however, were not necessarily the opinions of those they ostensibly represented. The average German-American citizen merely sympathized with the plight of their friends and relatives in war-torn Europe, and sent aid and relief to alleviate their suffering. Displays of cultural and nationalistic pride were not evidence of disloyalty to their adopted homeland, but a defensive reaction to newspaper editorials and critics that unfairly vilified them. This was not apparent to many Americans who failed to realize that to favor one side over another in a conflict toward which the United States was officially neutral, did not entail disloyalty.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 March 1916; *American Independent*, 26 March 1916, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *The Leader*, 13 May 1916.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Luebke, 122. For information concerning the formation of the American Independence Union, see Child, 53, 133 and Luebke, 110, 120-125.

<sup>30</sup> *American Independent*, 18 December 1915. Bauer was also president of the local *Alldeutscher Verband*.

<sup>31</sup> Daniels, 94.

## The Election of 1916:

President Wilson's foreign policy and pro-British sentiment incensed the National German-American Alliance. Hexamer was convinced that if German America voted as a bloc, they could elect whoever ran against Wilson in the next election. The group rallied behind the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes. The California chapter followed suit with a resolution at their annual convention in San Jose that declared support for Hughes and a "free and independent America," that did not want "again to be in economic or political dependence on the British Empire."<sup>32</sup> California's German-language newspapers also fell in line.

Over the following months, the pages of the *California Staats-Zeitung* relayed the anti-Wilson rhetoric and sentiment of the Alliance. In a revealing October 19, 1916 article titled, "Reasons Wilson Must be Defeated," the newspaper detailed several of the strategies discussed by the German-American Voters League on ways to enhance and spread pro-Hughes propaganda. This included fundraising methods, voter registration, and the use of volunteer committees to educate the various clubs about the importance of voting on election day. Also printed in the column was a circular issued by the central committee, which exclaimed, "Wilson Must be Defeated!" The document listed ten reasons why the German Americans supported Hughes, the number one reason being that Wilson was "England's friend." The article reprinted, in English, Wilson's infamous rebuke, "I neither seek the favor nor fear the displeasure of that small alien element amongst us, which puts loyalty to any foreign power before loyalty to the United States." The editorial follows with the rhetorical question, "German-Americans, do you need further reasons?"<sup>33</sup>

The 1916 presidential election was one of the closest races in American history. Though Wilson handily won the popular vote by a margin of nearly 600,000 votes, he narrowly won the electoral contest with 277 votes to 254. The crucial swing state in the presidential race was California, which held thirteen coveted electoral votes. Despite the prolific exhortations featured in the *Staats-Zeitung*, after all the votes had been tallied, Wilson won the state, and therefore secured reelection. He won

<sup>32</sup> *California Staats-Zeitung*, 28 September 1916, 1. For a full discussion of the implications of the endorsement of the National German-American Alliance on the Hughes presidential campaign, see Child, 137–153, and Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 167–185.

<sup>33</sup> "Weshalb Wilson geschlagen werden muß," *California Staats-Zeitung*, 19 October 1916, 8. The Irish press was also vehemently anti-Wilson and printed derogatory commentary in the lead up to the election including calling him the "fawning lickspittle of English power" and "a canting hypocrite who preaches neutrality, but whose every act is unneutral." *The Leader*, 4 November 1916, 5.

by only 3773 votes, receiving 46.65 percent of the vote to Hughes' 46.27 percent. Historian S. D. Lovell described the Democratic victory in California as "a home run in the ninth inning that broke up the ball game."<sup>34</sup>

### America Enters the War, 1917–1918

The reelection of Wilson in 1916 was a tremendous disappointment for the leadership of the prominent German-American organizations. Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917, followed by the interception of the Zimmerman telegram in February, excited the public to its highest levels since the sinking of the *Lusitania*. As relations between the U.S. and Germany degenerated, German Americans carefully measured the ways they displayed their opinions. On April 2, 1917, the President convened Congress and asked for a declaration of war. On April 4, the resolution passed in the Senate with a vote of 82 to 6. On April 6, the resolution passed the House by a vote of 373 to 54, and was signed that afternoon sending the nation officially into war.

Wilson's reelection altered the course of U.S. foreign relations, but also set the tone for war preparedness domestically. Opposition to the war among the public was far more widespread than the congressional voting indicated, and the President knew that support for the conflict needed to be cultivated. An executive order established the Committee on Public Information (CPI), whose mission was to rally public support for the war through the distribution of thousands of patriotic pamphlets, posters, and speeches. The propaganda campaign, however, had a significant side effect: it generated a climate of intolerance that created a backlash against German Americans, left-wing radicals, pacifists, and all dissenters.

California was no exception. California's program of state preparedness, as directed by Governor William Stephens, contributed to a domestic climate of anti-German hysteria that "provided one of the most extreme examples of the surrender of the American people to irrationality."<sup>35</sup> This hysteria both challenged the loyalty of and fostered a vicious public backlash against California's German population. Meanwhile, Stephens's predecessor waged battles on Capitol Hill in defense of American liberties and against many of Wilson's domestic wartime

<sup>34</sup> S. D. Lovell, *The Presidential Election of 1916* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 170–177.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), 28.

initiatives. A comparison of the rhetoric of Senator Johnson to the proclamations and policies of his successor, Governor Stephens, reveals how differently the two men perceived the domestic climate, and implies that the transition of the governorship in March 1917 had far greater implications for California's German Americans than did the reelection of Wilson alone.

After war was declared, Wilson asked each state governor to implement a state council of defense.<sup>36</sup> The functions, extent of authority, and activities of these defense councils varied from state to state. In April 1917, Governor Stephens complied, motioning for:

An act to create a State Council of Defense to make investigations into the effect of the occurrence of war upon the civil and economic life of the people of the State of California; to recommend to the Governor measures to provide for the public security, the better protection of public health, a fuller development of the economic resources of the state and the encouragement of military training; to impose upon public officers certain duties in connection herewith; and to make appropriation for the purposes of this act.<sup>37</sup>

The State Council of Defense coordinated numerous war-related activities throughout the state "to put the entire state on a thorough and coordinated preparedness basis." Draft registration, agricultural production, food conservation, Liberty Loans sales, public security, and enlisting aid from women's organizations were among the activities over which the organization labored.<sup>38</sup>

The shape of wartime patriotism in California can in part be attributed to the speeches delivered by Governor Stephens. Between March 1917 and November 1920, Stephens presented twenty-one war addresses, and over sixty various war proclamations and patriotic messages in which suppression of dissent became a constant theme. At the Citizens' Patriotic Mass Meeting in San Francisco on April 10, 1917, Stephens stated, "Lack of patriotism must be made odious," and, "there can be no neutrality where our own country is involved."<sup>39</sup> Before the Commonwealth Club on June 18, Stephens stressed:

<sup>36</sup> As part of the earlier preparedness campaign of 1916, Congress had created a Council of National Defense.

<sup>37</sup> *Report of the Activities of the California State Council of Defense from April 6, 1917, to January 1, 1918* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1918), 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-16, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *California in the War. War Addresses, Proclamations and Patriotic Messages of Governor William D. Stephens* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1921), 13. These speeches were transcribed by the War History Department of the California Historical Survey Commission, which documented California's role in the First World War.

Promoters of discord must be silenced. The great duty of the hour—the great duty of the war—is to ‘stand by the President.’ There can be no true patriotism that is not founded upon loyalty to the commander-in-chief of our army and navy. This of course, does not mean a ban on fair and constructive criticism. What I would include and condemn is that sort of criticism that is merely obstructive in character—inspired either by treason, propagandists, or petty political charlatans.<sup>40</sup>

By December 1917, Stephens was even more precise: “No half-hearted, on-the-fence loyalty will be approved. No living here and serving Germany, even in small degree will be tolerated . . . If he is in America and on the other side, he is helping Germany, and is therefore a traitor to America and should be put out of America.”<sup>41</sup> Stephens’s deliberate, vitriolic language left no question as to its intended targets and left little room for opponents of war to express dissent.

Yet through his orations in support of the domestic war effort and the State Council of Defense, Governor Stephens cooperated with and contributed to the national propaganda campaign against enemy aliens and domestic dissenters. The messages gave tacit approval to patriotic citizen groups that persecuted and subjected the German-American population to one of the greatest nativist backlashes the state has ever witnessed. The exhortations of Stephens sharply contrast with the sentiments expressed by his predecessor working on Capitol Hill. Writing to a constituent on April 5, 1917, Senator Johnson remarked in disgust, “This bunk about military preparedness, guarding the mountain passes . . . repelling the invader from our soil, suffering no profane hands to touch us, and the like, has gotten over, apparently in California, not alone with the stand-pat press but with most of our own.”<sup>42</sup>

The former California governor turned senator, Hiram Johnson, voted alongside the overwhelming majority of senators in favor of war. Later reflections revealed, however, that Johnson’s vote was not without grave misgivings. Writing to his sons on April 6, 1917, Johnson recalled the hollow, superficial quality of congressional debate on war and that the decision for war left him “depressed and disillusioned” and “filled with disgust and pessimism.”<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Johnson felt that the nation

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Jensen, 28–29.

<sup>43</sup> Hiram W. Johnson to his sons, 6 April 1917, quoted in Hiram Johnson and Robert E. Burke, eds., *The Diary Letters of Hiram Johnson, 1917–1945*, vol. 1 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983).

was obligated to defend its honor and respond to Germany's attacks on American trade vessels.<sup>44</sup>

In the months following April 1917, Hiram Johnson battled on behalf of civil liberties. A section of the proposed Espionage Bill, under debate in Congress in April and May 1917, allowed the President the right to censor the press. Johnson argued that the purpose of the statute was "to render impossible legitimate criticism . . . of those who may lead during this war, and lead in incompetence and in inefficiency."<sup>45</sup> The Senator was even more critical of the Sedition Act of 1918, a bill, he argued, which was meant to suppress the press and "prevent any man, no matter who he is, from indulging in fair and decent expression, or voicing legitimate criticism concerning the present Government, the present administration, or any department in respect to the war." In Johnson's view, bills such as the Sedition Act "do not unite a people; they breed discontent; they cause suspicions to stalk all through the land; they make the one man the spy upon the other; they take a great virile, brave people and make the people timid and fearful."<sup>46</sup> Johnson's warnings could not have been more prophetic.

In California, as in much of the rest of the nation, superpatriotic Americans mobilized in their local communities to track down agents of the Kaiser and stamp out German *kultur*. The American Protective League (APL) was a nationwide network of volunteers organized in March 1917 under Attorney General Thomas Gregory and the Department of Justice. Boasting more than 200,000 members, the amateur detectives of the APL sought out evidence of German-American subversion across the nation. The official history of the APL was recorded in *The Web*, in which the author, Emerson Hough, recounted efforts to ferret out subversives throughout the country. In San Francisco, Hough reported, "1,162 cases of disloyalty and sedition, 277 cases of propaganda, and 105 of radicalism."<sup>47</sup> Though the figures are likely inflated, in part to justify the "work" of the APL, they are also indicative of the extent of APL

<sup>44</sup> Richard Coke Lower, *A Bloc of One: The Political Career of Hiram W. Johnson*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 100–101. According to Lower, Johnson was never able to imbue war with notions of romantic chivalry like Teddy Roosevelt, or saw in war a means to achieve altruistic ends as did Wilson. The progressive senator was most concerned about the threat war posed to ending domestic social reform.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917–1918* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 216–218.

<sup>47</sup> Emerson Hough, *The Web* (Chicago: Reilly & Lee Co., 1919), 333; Luebke, 211–212. In addition to suspected agents of the Kaiser, the APL was very suspicious of the Industrial Workers of the World, and their actions figure into Hough's account.

members' obsession with the slightest infractions and suspected un-American activities in San Francisco.

The lives of the German element were greatly disrupted. Both Germans and Austrians were advised by the Justice Department to stay away from the Cliff House and the waterfront.<sup>48</sup> During the first week of February 1918, all resident male citizens of Germany, *Reichsdeutsche*, were ordered to register with the government as "enemy aliens" and to submit four photographs to the authorities. San Francisco had an estimated 2,500 enemy aliens. Individuals that failed to register were subject to internment for the duration of the war, although Austrians and German women were exempted.<sup>49</sup> Harassment of German Americans became commonplace in San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1918. After a German orchestra at the *Hofbrau Café* refused to play the song "Over There," a popular Allied wartime song, three sailors left and returned with over a hundred soldiers and sailors. The orchestra played "The Star Spangled Banner" to avoid trouble, and the *Chronicle* gleefully reported the event with the headline, "Café Orchestra Becomes Patriotic When the Sailors March In."<sup>50</sup> A San Francisco banker, George Boden, was arrested "as a secret servant of the German Imperial Bank," and charged with having "furnished a means for Germans in San Francisco to send money for the German war loans." In addition, Boden allegedly provided financial assistance to German agents and communicated military information to Berlin.<sup>51</sup>

The months of April and May, however, featured the greatest number of attacks against German Americans as the hysteria and climate of repressive conformity reached its apex. Three men were sentenced to ninety days in jail and fined \$200 each for allegedly toasting the Kaiser in an Oakland café.<sup>52</sup> Frederick Schiller was dismissed as the leader of the Municipal Orchestra as part of a resolution "that no enemy alien should be employed by the city."<sup>53</sup> Two German machinists were arrested after a waiter overheard them conversing in the foreign tongue and informed authorities the men had ridiculed the Liberty Loans.<sup>54</sup> Patriotic expression reached its most violent pitch in the East Bay in early May. A band of men that called themselves the "Knights of Liberty" captured an Oakland tailor, Henry Steinmoltz, placed a rope around his neck, and

<sup>48</sup> *California Staats-Zeitung*, 13 December 1917.

<sup>49</sup> "California Germans Forced to Register," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 January 1918, 11; "Male Germans Must Give U.S. 4 Photographs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 January 1918, 6.

<sup>50</sup> "Police Smile When Hofbrau Talks Royalty," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1918.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 January 1918, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 April 1918, 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 April 1918, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 April 1918, 3.

hung him from a tree until he lost consciousness. The same night, another German, Guido Poenisch, was taken from his home by the same group, tarred and feathered, and then chained to a cannon until the police arrived. Both men were given “fair and impartial” trials, according to the Knights, and were convicted of making unpatriotic utterances.<sup>55</sup> Apparently, the Knights found it more patriotic to abuse German-Americans at home than fight for America abroad.

Local German families and businesses began to change their names in order to conceal their ethnic identities. Two of the oldest German-American institutions in San Francisco underwent name changes when the German Hospital changed to the Franklin Hospital, and the German Savings and Loan Society became the San Francisco Savings and Loans Society.<sup>56</sup> The *Hofbrau* Café became “The States” and the Heidelberg Café changed its name to the Columbia Inn. The manager of the latter explained, “We are making the change for patriotic reasons.”<sup>57</sup> Other Americans of German descent attempted to anglicize their surnames. The Kaiser family shortened their last name to Kaye, Julius Joseph Finsterbusch had his name shortened to Bush, and Bertram Wertheimer became Bertram Worth.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, on April 13, 1918, the *Chronicle* reported that ninety-three German fraternal societies and clubs, such as the Pacific *Saengerbund* and the *Turnverein*, would disband for the duration of the war.<sup>59</sup>

The official declaration of war against Germany caused a sweeping shift of opinion in the German-language press. The editorials of the *California Staats-Zeitung* and *California Demokrat* provided a pro-American, pro-Allied viewpoint of the war and endorsed California’s mobilization. In May 1917, the *Staats-Zeitung* explained to its readers why they should purchase Liberty Loans, and in November promoted the CPI-issued booklet “How the War Came to America,” which had become available in German.<sup>60</sup> The Irish press counseled a “time for restraint,” stating that as Americans, “we serve King nor Kaiser.”<sup>61</sup> On October 6, 1917, Congress attached a rider to the Trading-with-the-Enemy Act, requiring all German-language newspapers to supply English translations of “any comments respecting the Government of the United States . . . its policies, international relations, the state or conduct of war, or of any

<sup>55</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1918; *ibid.*, 5 May 1918; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 May 1918.

<sup>56</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 May 1918; *ibid.*, 17 May 1918.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 April 1918, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 May 1918, 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 April 1918, 5.

<sup>60</sup> *California Staats-Zeitung*, 31 May 1917, 4; *ibid.*, 8 November 1917, 1.

<sup>61</sup> *The Leader*, 14 April 1917, 4; *ibid.*, 12 May 1917, 10.

other matter relating thereto.”<sup>62</sup> Material deemed unsuitable could result in the revocation of mailing privileges. Consequently, after October 1917, each San Francisco German-language newspaper supplied their newspaper in translation to the Postmaster for approval.<sup>63</sup> The combined effect of the Sedition Act and suppression of all things German temporarily killed the *California Demokrat* and *California Staats-Zeitung*. After sixty-two years of publication, the newspapers ceased publishing on May 16, 1918 for the duration of the war.<sup>64</sup>

After May 1918, incidents of harassment tapered off. Domestically, the German-American community maintained a lower profile in the face of rampant war fervor, while internationally the tides of war began to turn in favor of the United States, England, and France. Clearly, the San Francisco German community had been dramatically affected by the events of the First World War. After enjoying relatively high levels of success in their adopted country, the German population found itself the object of suspicion and derision once war engulfed the European continent. The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 fostered an ethnic cohesion among large sections of America’s German population, as they rallied to support their friends and relatives overseas in a war in which they perceived the British, French, and Russians as unjust aggressors. Their enthusiasm, however, was frequently equated with disloyalty, a charge with repercussions not only for German Americans, but also for the civil liberties of all war dissenters. Once the United States entered the war, the White House demanded unwavering loyalty to the American cause—a requirement that was filtered down to the states, and readily sanctioned by the new California governor, William Stephens. Relative to his predecessor, Stephens’s rhetoric was particularly callous, but one can merely speculate from the available evidence that Hiram Johnson might have counseled moderation and tolerance within California.

The experience of San Francisco Germans was consequently reflective of the wartime realities of urban German populations across the country. In the closing months of the war, San Francisco Germans, frightened and intimidated, retreated from public view, dismantled or renamed many of their institutions and networks, and attempted to maintain a low profile, while simultaneously displaying patriotism through the purchase of Liberty Bonds and showing support of war objectives. After the armistice of 1918, life once again approached

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Luebke, 241.

<sup>63</sup> Noted in English on the first page, and often atop multiple columns, was the following line: “True translation filed with the Postmaster at San Francisco on [date] as required by the Act of October 6, 1917.”

<sup>64</sup> The *Staats-Zeitung* reemerged in a new Los Angeles office in 1919.

normalcy for German Americans, and some German ethnic societies and newspapers slowly reappeared. Yet, the legacy of the war, coupled with an overall decline in German immigration over the ensuing years, combined to ensure that both the participation and enthusiasm for these networks would never again achieve the vitality of the prewar years.

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