German Immigrants and Their Children

By Carl Wittke

In 1930 the German stock in the United States, including German immigrants and native-born Americans with one or both parents born in Germany, totaled 6,873,103 persons, or 17.7 per cent of the total foreign white stock in the United States. Thirty years earlier the percentage was 31.4 per cent. In 1930 there were 1,608,814 persons in the United States who were born in Germany, or 12 per cent of the total foreign-born stock. Of the total German stock of 1930, over 75 per cent were born in America, and the census of 1910 revealed that the rate of naturalization for the German-born exceeded that of any other group in the United States. German immigration had long since passed its high-water mark of the 1850's and 1860's. Over 70 per cent of the total German immigration occurred in the half-century from 1840 to 1890. The census of 1940 provides no tabulation of persons of foreign or mixed parentage, but indicates that there are now only 1,237,772 persons residing in the United States who were born in Germany.

These figures make it abundantly clear that the great period of German immigration is long since past and that the German stock in the United States is well along in the process of being diluted and absorbed into a composite Americanism. Nevertheless, the German immigration of the last century constituted, in numbers and in quality, one of the most significant additions to the American population, and furnished perhaps a greater cultural contribution than that of any other non-English immigrant group. Far more important than the statistical counting of heads is the migration of ideas, as immigrants bring their life patterns to a new land.

The Colonial Germans deserve far more attention than can be given them here. As a cultural group, they and their present-day descendants have been important not only in the development of Pennsylvania but also in many other areas into which this vigorous peasant stock from the Palatinate overflowed. Since the Civil War there has been a veritable renaissance in the study and appreciation of "Pennsylvania German" culture.[1] Like their Colonial ancestors, the Pennsylvania Germans of today are largely an agricultural people, thrifty, sound, and substantial. Religion is still of the essence of their personality. Pennsylvania alone, of all the Thirteen Original Colonies, had a bilingual culture, and large parts of the state remain bilingual to this day. "Pennsylvania Dutch" is the oldest immigrant language still in daily use in America, for the descendants of these Palatine immigrants of two centuries ago have retained their language, whereas many of their fellow countrymen who came much later have lost it. The Pennsylvania Germans have little in common with the militant liberalism of the leaders of the nineteenth-century German immigration. They are less Germanophile than the descendants of Englishmen are Anglophile, and they have less connection with modern Germany than New England has with England.

Character of German Immigrants

The great mass of German immigrants arrived during the nineteenth century. Most of them were farmers, artisans, and ordinary laborers, plain people motivated by the desire to im-

[1] See, for example, Arthur D. Graeff, *et al.*, *The Pennsylvania Germans*. Edited by Ralph Wood. Princeton, 1942.

prove their earthly lot and augment their personal freedom in a new land of opportunity. They were, for the most part, thrifty and patient home builders who added a conservative and stabilizing force to the America of the last century. They helped to win the West for agriculture and they treated their land as a sacred trust, not as a speculative commodity. The skilled laborers among the new arrivals played a significant part in speeding up the tempo of the industrial transformation of the United States.

Though the bulk of the German immigration consisted of the plain, common people, they acquired a leadership in America which enabled them to make a unique contribution to the emerging American cultural pattern. Among the new arrivals from Germany there were many men of substance, education, professional training, and social standing, who had left their native land after the collapse of the liberal movements of 1830 and 1848 to seek asylum in the United States. They had been champions of the idealism and political radicalism of German organizations like the *Turnvereine,* the *Burschenschaften* of the universities, and the *Freimännervereine* of the rationalist movement. They had risked their future in the Fatherland in a futile endeavor to unify Germany under a republican regime, only to see the abortive revolutions of 1830 and 1848 end in a victory for the forces of reaction.

ATTITUDES OF GERMAN SETTLERS

For some years after their arrival in the United States, these political refugees were primarily interested in using their new home to raise funds, circulate revolutionary propaganda, and organize revolutionary societies in order that all might be in readiness for a new republican upheaval in Europe. But as time rolled on and their hopes for a republican Germany and a Continental revolution turned to ashes, they took root in the United States. They were sharply critical of many American institutions, particularly slavery, but they appreciated their new-found freedom, and quickly assumed the political and intellectual leadership of the German immigration.

To this brilliant group belong some of the most distinguished names in the history of the German element in the United States. Some were rationalists, atheists, and freethinkers; many were violently anticlerical and strongly socialistic; all had a passion for personal liberty. They did not hesitate to express their contempt for the "half-barbarian" culture of the raw American frontier, or to attack what they disdainfully called the shirt-sleeve methods and tobacco cuds of American politics. They boasted of the civilization which had produced Beethoven, Goethe, and Lessing, and sought to transplant it to the United States. As a matter of fact, many a German immigrant who broke the prairie sod of a Middle Western farm or dug canals or built American railroads had received a classical or professional education in Germany and could read Homer and Cicero in the original. Some envisaged the transplanting of German *Kultur* to sections of the United States, where a new and free Germany might be built in isolation from the rest of America and free from the restrictions that prevailed in the old Fatherland.

Space is not available to describe the *Deutschtum* of which these intelligentsia were the intellectual and spiritual leaders, and which flourished in the United States of the last half of the last century. One need only call attention to such distinguished naturalized Americans of German origin as Schurz,

Körner, Engelmann, Münch, Stallo, Heinzen, Hecker, Kapp, Lieber, and scores of others to appreciate their importance to the United States. These men were the spiritual heirs of Kant and Fichte and Hegel, and they provided a leadership for the German immigration which has never been equaled by any other group. In the recently completed *Dictionary of American Biography* there are sketches of 361 men and women born in Germany proper, a number which is exceeded only by those born in England.

The Germans transplanted their theaters, *Turnvereine,* singing societies, newspapers, churches, schools, and beer gardens wherever they settled, and in them, kept alive the customs and traditions of their Fatherland. In politics, where for a time they exercised less influence than their numbers and ability might have warranted, German immigrants were mostly Democrats, until the antislavery struggle, the homestead policy, and the rise of the Republican Party weaned many of their leaders away from their earlier political allegiance. Even so, the majority of the German voters probably remained Democrats, and though opposed to the further extension of slavery, they were not, for the most part, radical abolitionists. In the Civil War they played a notable patriotic role. In the fields of science, invention, business, and the arts, their contributions are so well known and have been pointed out so often that it is unnecessary to undertake to enumerate them here.[2]

CLASH WITH NATIVISM

Unfortunately, events of the middle nineteenth century tended to divide the German element from their neighbors, as a group apart. One reason for this isolation was the role of the "Forty-eighters" and their kind, as leaders of the Germans in the United States. Proud of their culture, they arrived in America at a time when a great struggle with American Puritanism could hardly have been avoided. The radical German leaders were bitterly resentful of blue laws, Puritan Sabbath observance, and the rising temperance "swindle," and even the German Lutherans and Catholics agreed with them in regarding such phenomena as peculiarly offensive manifestations of a Puritan spirit which was utterly contrary to their Continental ideas of personal liberty.

Simultaneously, the United States experienced its worst wave of nativism, culminating in the bigotry and violence of the Knownothing period. The Knownothings opposed unrestricted immigration and wanted to make naturalization more difficult, and they sought to deprive the foreign-born of many political and economic privileges. They opposed free homesteads in the West, an issue on which all immigrants were particularly sensitive. It cannot be denied that there were a number of legitimate reasons for challenging the unrestricted immigration of the fifties, for the abuses associated with immigration, naturalization, and voting in this turbulent period of American politics were no less than scandalous.

The main attack of the nativists was directed against the "Irish papists," but the Germans also received their share of criticism. They were denounced for their clannishness, their "infidelity, Socialism and other soul-destroying errors." Germans were equally aggressive and intolerant in expressing their contempt for native American "barbarians" and "Methodists," and some of the freethinking Forty-eighters viciously at-

[2] See Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (New York, 1939), pp. 66–97, 187–261, 362–401.

tacked all religion and all churches, and espoused a political and economic radicalism which won them the reputation of being "red Republicans" and "foreign anarchists." Thus the German leadership attacked Puritan bigotry, and the native Americans retaliated with the charge that in German communities, with their beer and band music and picnics, the Sabbath was being turned "into a saturnalia."

CULTURAL ISOLATION

A crisis resulted from the clash of these two sharply contrasting points of view which had its repercussions for more than half a century. Both parties to the controversy were guilty of petulance, arrogance, utter intolerance, and even violence. But the important thing to remember is that this crisis, provoked by aggressive German leadership and intolerant native Americanism, solidified the Germans in the United States to a degree that kept them aggressively on the defensive for the next two generations in a battle against complete Americanization and in defense of their cultural isolation. The major political parties, always eager for votes, aggravated the situation by angling for German votes, thus enabling the Germans to assert their demands for special consideration and giving them a false sense of their own importance. In the process, many naturalized German-Americans ceased to be Germans in any political sense, but also never became wholly American. Eagerly bent on preserving what they considered the superior culture of Goethe and Schiller, and stubbornly championing what they considered personal liberty (a concept that came in later years to mean opposition to the spreading prohibition movement), the German element wanted to be let alone. They were not concerned with Germanizing America, but they resented all attempts by the "Yankee" and the "nativist" to interfere with their long-established way of life.[3]

In later years some of the ablest German republicans, like Heinzen, refused to become reconciled with the new Germany of 1871, in which militarism and autocracy were the main supports of the new nationalism. But the majority of the articulate German element in the United States hailed the empire with joy and satisfaction. At the same time, the great mass of Germans in America never really adjusted their cultural life to that of modern Germany or sought to keep abreast of its political and cultural development. What the Germans in the United States continued to adhere to and celebrate in their many societies was the Germany of pre-Bismarckian times, the Germany of the "good old" *Biedermeier* period. Thus, what was defended and cherished in the United States, in a losing battle with the forces of assimilation and Americanization, was a culturally static *Deutschtum,* what the late Heinrich Maurer called "a new colonial culture," or what Professor Feise has referred to as "colonial petrification." The American *Deutschtum* was rooted in the German cultural traditions of several generations earlier, and it found expression not in Pan-Germanism, the rivalry for colonies, and the *Drang nach Osten* of the new Germany, but in the activities of the "old days," with their singing societies, *Turnvereine,* bowling clubs and literary societies, beer halls, sharpshooting, pinochle, and skat tournaments, and all the other things that the American Germans associate so sentimentally with *Gemütlichkeit.* These things they tried to preserve as long as possible, and without the least feeling that thereby they were in any way

[3] This thesis is ably presented in John A. Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America,* New York, 1940.

neglecting their political loyalty to the United States.

EFFECTS OF FIRST WORLD WAR

There probably would have been little reference after 1900 to the question of the "hyphen" among the German-Americans had there not been a first World War. There is abundant evidence to prove the steady inroads the relentless forces of Americanization were making on the isolation of German communities. The first World War was, for the German stock in America, one of the most difficult and humiliating experiences any immigrant group could possibly have had. Never having dreamed of the possibility of a war between Germany and the United States, the German element suddenly found themselves distrusted and spurned by the land of their nativity, and by many of their American neighbors in the land of their choice.

Misunderstanding, suspicion, conflict of emotions, bewildered readjustment, and tragedy marked the years from 1914 to 1918 when everything of German antecedents in the United States was suddenly labeled as part of a vast Pan-German plot to Prussianize America. Partly because of the arrogance and stubbornness with which they had hitherto tried to cling to their cultural separatism, men and women of German blood now were obliged to defend their loyalty and their character in communities where they had lived for decades. A wave of "100 per cent Americanism" threatened to engulf and destroy forever the cultural movement of the Forty-eighters. The patriotic drive against "Huns" and "Teutonism" included attacks on the German language and literature, music, newspapers, street and family names, and everything else of German origin, and led actually, in a few communities, to serious outbreaks of mob violence. The crisis of 1914–18, as far as the German-Americans were concerned, threatened to prove far more dangerous than the attack of the nativists of the middle nineteenth century.

For a brief period the German element closed their ranks to defend themselves and their kinsmen across the sea against what they regarded as the unwarranted attacks of Anglophiles and the pro-British neutrality of an Anglophile government in Washington. From 1914 to 1917 outside pressures upon the German group tended to produce a new solidarity and led to a short-lived renaissance among German societies and German-language newspapers in the United States. In their eagerness to defend against malicious slander the cultural traditions they had cherished in America for decades, some of the American German group clearly overstepped the bounds of common sense, good judgment, and discretion, and by their unwise words and deeds added fuel to the spreading flames of misunderstanding and intolerance.

In 1917 all this ended with tragic finality when the United States went to war against Germany. Some of the German group in the United States at once conducted a hypocritical retreat. The great majority, after a period of sullen silence and conflicts of emotions and loyalties which few of their fellow Americans ever fully understood, arrived at a position of complete support of the Government in its war effort. Even so, they found themselves in a dilemma. If they remained passively loyal, they were criticized for lack of patriotism; if they became extremely active for the war, they were likely to be suspected of duplicity and hypocrisy. As time went on, the German group, like all others, acquired a stake in the war through war loans and, above all, through the drafting of their sons and grandsons for military service. High

state and Federal officials have testified to the complete loyalty of the German stock in the United States in 1917 and 1918. At the same time, newspapers published in Germany bitterly denounced them for their betrayal of the Fatherland in its hour of peril. Alien enemies caused comparatively little trouble during the war.[4] Thus the German-American hyphen was to a large extent burned away in the trial by fire of the first World War.

EFFECTS OF SECOND WORLD WAR

In spite of the violent temper of the times, the American crusade against the "Hun" died down quickly, but the experiences of the war years left scars and a legacy of bitterness that have not yet been entirely erased. Twenty-three years later, the United States was again at war with Germany—this time with a Germany dominated by a ruthless leadership which by contrast made the Kaiser's Germany shine as a model of virtue and decency. The rise of Hitlerism again raised an issue among what remained of the German societies and activities in the United States. For a time it threatened serious factional divisions among the German element. In part, the German group themselves were responsible for their new difficulties, for some had foolishly tried to recapture their cultural isolation after the first World War, and very few had considered it of the least importance to record publicly their attitude toward the Nazis and the democratic way of life. Like those who belonged to other racial strains and were intrigued by the alleged virtues of fascism, a relatively small number of German-born and native Americans of German stock were attracted, before Pearl Harbor, by the swastika and Fritz Kuhn's aping of gangster methods, storm trooper camps, parades, and uniforms in the United States. But anti-Nazi leagues were also organized among the German stock to combat Nazi influences, and many German societies were split into violently hostile groups. In the nationwide debate over isolationism, the German element probably agreed, for the most part, with that 75 per cent American majority whom the various polls of public opinion reported as opposed to American intervention in Europe.

Pearl Harbor quickly unified the Nation and ended the argument whether the United States would incur greater risks by going in or staying out of the war. There has been little difficulty with German alien enemies in the present war; Nazi spy rings are being efficiently handled by the FBI; and the German stock in the United States, with unimportant exceptions, is meeting every test of loyalty in this second World War as it did in the first. This second crisis in twenty-five years in German-American relations may finally end the hyphen and convince the German stock in America that it must liquidate once and for all the conflict which inevitably results from efforts to maintain the cultural isolation of a minority group beyond its normal span of years.

AMERICANIZATION PROCEEDS

The German-language press is rapidly dying. Most German churches have long since given up their services in the German language, and German societies of every description find it increasingly difficult to maintain their membership. The second- and third-generation immigrant stock know little of the language or the traditions of their fathers and grandfathers. The process of Americanization goes on relentlessly, and the more naturally it proceeds, the more effective it is likely to be. If in

[4] For a more detailed discussion, see Carl Wittke, *German-Americans and the World War*, Columbus, Ohio, 1936.

the present war we avoid the mistakes of twenty-five years ago, both at home and abroad, this may be the last time that the United States will have to face the German-American problem. In several decades more, the cultural heritage of the German immigrant stock will have been absorbed into a composite Americanism.

A heavy responsibility rests on all Americans to deal intelligently and understandingly with immigrant groups in this time of total war. But an even greater responsibility rests upon what is left of the German stock in the United States to demonstrate with indisputable finality that whatever lingering, sentimental devotion to the language and ways of their fathers they still cherish, they have not the least desire to perpetuate a politically alien group among the American people.

Carl F. Wittke, Ph.D., is professor of history and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. He was formerly professor of history and head of the Department of History at Ohio State University. He is author of A History of Canada (1928), We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant (1939), and other books.