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German-American Nazis and the Meaning of American Homeland, 1935–1939

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History states that the United States defeated Nazi Germany not only militarily, but ideologically too. This assertion is the central concern of my paper. As the liberal, American identity has endured, and German fascism has not, so too has the idea of irreconcilable differences between two opposing political identities. Since 1945, a post-war need to “castigate fascism as an aberration” has certainly given way to more subtle research, that with “an acknowledgement of fascism’s complexity, ambiguity and seductiveness” (Kallis, 1, 2000). However, the “urge to *explain* ... fascism” has endured and is still the central concern of any project, even those which attempt to place fascism in historical context (Kallis, 3, 2003, my italics). This need, in academic circles, for a contrast between past and present society is reflected in every-day life. Americanism has been one such implicit reference for Western European economics and public affairs since 1945, and, as perhaps the feeling of European debt to the United States subsides, even current political attempts at a European identity cannot erase Nazism and the historical advent of American intervention (Judt, 831, 2007). At some point in the future, perhaps, the Soviet Union will be accredited with its somewhat larger human contribution to Germany’s defeat. Over half the total deaths therein, or “25 million persons,” were Russian (Aldcroft, 134, 1980). For now, however, American narratives of the Second World War are resolute:

the American identity of voluntarism and freedom triumphed over the fascist identity of communal discipline, both in Europe and the wider world.

The decisive element in America's contribution to Allied victory in the European theatre was, of course, its superior industrial capacity and resources (c.f. Tooze, 2006). Certain tactical and strategic advantages also played a role. Japanese effectiveness assumed German continental successes and a victory against the United States, as Japan was of course economically weak (Hart, 712, 1974). In assumptions on American victory it is, however, an element of a far more abstract nature which predominates; the afore-mentioned novelty of American morality, and American identity, in contrast with the identity of its fascist opponents. At the heart of this idea is a persuasive proposition, one which this paper addresses: German and American identities were entirely different from one another in the years before democracy fought, and then triumphed, over fascism.

This idea of American national identity as explicitly contrasting – and conflicting – with the National Socialist German identity is not however historically accurate, at least not for certain German-Americans who lived through “the gathering storm” of the latter 1930s. Indeed, the letters of a few Americans, these German-Americans, make a very different contribution to the history of pre-Second World War national and regional identity and perhaps shed light on the later conflict between German and American lives, states and political identities.

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Now stored in a Federal Archive in a grey suburb of Berlin, the correspondence of some pre-war German-Americans deviate somewhat from the image of “dark forces” that compelled a clash of civilizations in the inter-war years (Ferguson, 646, 2007). Mostly, these letters produced by Nazi Americans are to the contrary outstanding in their recognizable normalcy. Consider one such letter, sent from the United States in 1935 by a German-American émigré George W. Krausse. At 71 years old, he is reviewing his life in America for those still in the German *Vaterland*. Most strikingly, the German and

American parts of his identity are practically inseparable from one another. Perhaps this has something to do with the elderly Krausse sharing an American congressman's opinions on the French (that they ought "just once to get a good hiding from Germany"). One of the most bizarre blurrings of the line between his identities, however, comes in a recollection from just after the First World War. It is worth recounting in detail:

Later, when the [Great] war was lost, my kid came home and said to me, "Dad, if if you want to see the German Fleet you *have* to go the movie theatre!" I went and I saw the fleet alright, the same one which would have been shipped to England.¹ But at the end [of the film], the *English King* came into view on the screen. Everyone stood up, many hundreds, only me and my neighbor stayed sitting down. I didn't know the guy [sitting next to me],² but [he] said "Better that we get up, just listen to those behind us." I said "*I am an American* it's not right for me."³ But we had to, whether we wanted to or not, else it would have been some miserable suffering [for us].⁴

It is Krausse's German pride that took him to the theatre, but his American pride which prevented him from standing up for the English monarch, never mind that the majority of Americans were, in 1918 at least, quite willing to pay at least temporary tribute to the outdated English system they were bailing out. Most interesting here, however, is how the Germans seem more literally American than anyone else in the theatre - they will not stand for a monarch, but are more American only because they are slightly less American; they are also Germans. What the correspondence of Krausse tell us about regional identity is that it can be fractured, but fractured in so much as its component parts are often interchangeable with, and similar too, other regional identities.

Consider the identity of Krausse during its formative period. He discusses his having emigrated to the United States in the 1890s and the life that followed thereafter:

The steam [engine] and the railroad brought us 800 miles inland to Medford, Wisconsin, where finally my long yearned-for wish was fulfilled. I wanted, namely, to be a free man, on my own land and soil. I took a home and began to make my self independent.

This could be, of course, any quintessential rendition of the American dream and no doubt Krausse was aware of this, otherwise he would not have recognized America as having the potential to fulfill his hopes in the first instance. How does he, however, describe his new found independence in terms of regional identity? He says

[I was living in] the middle of a primeval forest, without path[s] or] footbridge[s], *like the Germans of old*.

Yet this identification with *Deutschtum* dictated neither his behavior nor the practical wishes of his new life: his only child. Born in America and

11 years old [she]... didn't have any schooling, could only say *yes* and *no* [in English], although she spoke good German... however, a child born in America must be able to speak English too

Krausse has two identities, German and American. They share certain themes and are explicitly not in conflict with one another. This is not to say, however, that he is not a fully convinced Nazi. Krausse apparently saw no contradiction, in 1935, between his assertion that he was *American* and the manner in which he signed his letter, that is with an exaggerated "*Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler! Hitler!*" Various German-American resentments had perhaps built up. He recalls, during the First World War, that "*Sauerkraut* had to be re-named Liberty-Cabbage."

For Christmas 1936, one Hedwig Schwenk wrote to her son with a long, detailed description of the Californian landscape. Aside from the learned tradition of German travelers and their romantic engagements with foreign nations, there is present a new sense of specifically American awe:

Our path feeds through mountains, through fragrant orange and lemon groves. The over-ripe oranges lie – golden balls – in the grass. The lemons flower and produce fruit at the same time, through the whole year.⁵

Indeed, the every-day is present too in the form of Christmas, and nothing in either German or American identities conflicts with the obvious being shared.

Indeed, there is a large degree of implicit similarity, in both letters, between American and German prospects and desires. One example of this is an identification of the American project with colonial life and, more particularly, potential German immigration outside Europe. A German-American's letter from Texas makes this point

Here ...[the United States] is a very good, sandy country ... we farm cotton, maize, and all [the] garden fruits. Since the first of May we've eat[en] new potatoes, and [in] September we plant again... Now I'm completely happy here, we feel only German... [but, h]opefully our Adolf Hitler will get the colonies back soon, then we'll go over there and plant cotton ... as we have learnt [here in Texas]. It's a fine harvest. Again, thanks for the newspapers.

*Heil, heil Deutschland! Heil Hitler!*⁶

Even at their most vagrantly anti-American, German American Nazis' recollection of the First World War contained admissions of a shared identity.

The World War came and I in my life I will never forget how this country dealt our German *Vaterland* the death blow when it was wretched and lying on the floor. Although I have become a citizen of this country, and in every way done everything [befitting of an American citizen] ... today I am also a German human being.⁷

This particular outburst, quite aside from its admission of a legal and outward American way of life, contains the germs of another German-American identity: membership in the "white imperialist club,"

for want of a better term, and a sense of doom brought about by the internecine warfare between like states and similar nations.

I can still, always, only see this sad American deed as a sure sign of its *own* downfall⁸

This last extract might well be read as a washing-of-hands, but has the tone, too, of a sadness on behalf of the new American homeland, a kind of implicit identity of interests and self in a more sensible international American conduct. So despite a claim that “after more than 30 years, my German heart has never been brought...,” and welcoming signs that “our German government wants to follow the example of the Italian government, and that is that a born German can never lose his German citizenship rights, as long as he lives,” the letter writer, Hermann von Busch, had no desire to return to Europe. Von Busch was more content in America, despite alleged death threats presumably from Americans as the 1930s wore on, writing simply that “it’s very easily possible that this letter will be my last.” Even faced with death, natural or otherwise, he clearly has little desire to return to Germany. In any case, “fine undertakings in honesty and peace and human justice” are, he believes, being carried out in Germany and this is comfort enough.

Nazis wrote to the United States from Germany too of course, usually describing German-Americans in more explicitly ideological terms, for example as living in “the soil of [the] National Socialist world-view.”⁹ Chicago Pastor Georg von Bosse, in October 1935, wrote to an American friend or colleague

Homeland [*Heimat*] is always homeland, and today everyone in Germany is cared for, as in no other country in the world. Of course, I don’t know how you stand politically, but I guess that you, like every other German who loves their *Vaterland*, are National Socialist¹⁰

Although the Pastor conceded American wealth and contrasted Germany unfavorably with a “rich and God blessed America.” Nazism was not necessarily fanatical. Sometimes, indeed, mentions of Nazism in letters from Germany was little more than cursory and implicit.

I have received the [letter], my and my wife's best thanks...
The Germans here in Charata are very proud of their German community and will also uphold it.¹¹

But the view that "America works surely and certainly toward war with Germany"¹² due to Roosevelt being "totally taken with [the] Jews"¹³ tended to predominate in many letters. That is to say, out-right Nazism should not be understated, especially as the decade wore on. One letter states

I am proud that I am a German and we will still win the world for ourselves. God help the *Führer* and all Germans!¹⁴

* *

As stated, the identity of German-Americans was more subtle. Despite the obvious sense of long-term cultural panic in a predominantly Anglophile society, for example the observation that the German language had been falling off in the years since the First World War,¹⁵ a fractured sense of self pervaded. Neither American nor German, but both, once and together. This is the sense expressed most clearly in the closing of one of von Busch's letters. Speaking of the growing language barrier between the generations in the American heartlands, he also seemingly speaks on behalf of all those in German periphery. He asks of those still in Germany

How can you understand us? How can you understand the 6,000,000 German-born Germans [living in America]?

He is not referencing language barriers, but something intangible, perhaps the ill-ease of a clash of similar identities.

Conclusion

To conclude this all too brief review of German-American letters written in the 1930s, I would like to contrast the contemporary perspective of private German-America with its official Nazi rep-

resentation. As far as Berlin was concerned, this official perspective was that German-Americans were simply *Volksgenossen* – racial comrades – engaged only in struggle on behalf of the *Führer*. On Sunday 23rd July 1939, an exhibition reflecting this view was held in Berlin. The title was *Amerikadeutschtum im Kampf* or “German-Americans in Struggle.” Much publicized by the German authorities in Germany, the majority of RSVPs were however negative, politely declining the chance to witness documents from America showing “a small group of Germans without example [who are] for *Führer* and *Reich*.” Perhaps the negative responses were an implicit verification of that same view – that Germans could not possibly have any ambiguities about them in the era of National Socialism. I would argue that such a view, dating to the past as it does, would not make for good historical practice were it to be replicated uncritically and in whole (c.f. Chomsky, 160, 2003).

The Americanism of German-Americans who lived through the last real decade of twentieth century German sovereignty is thus compelling by contrast. As the years wore on, that is as the thirties continued towards the advent of the Second World War, more explicitly Nazi sentiments were certainly conveyed in many German-American letters. Never, however, are American sentiments fully subdued by an outright contrast between fascism and Americanism. The conclusion of this paper is then simple. No doubt Americanism and Nazism fought and no doubt American and German identities clashed before and during the Second World War. It would indeed be the worse kind of historical reductionism that equated one mass system, a democracy, with another, the Hitler dictatorship. It is, however, no easy matter to reconstruct two entirely separate American and German identities during the 1930s, at least as far as those who had direct experience of both projects were concerned. Rather than look back at America’s enemies as wholly different entities, possessed of wholly different compositions, historians researching the twentieth century might do better to focus on the similarities between advanced modern states. I thus argue against studies contrasting fascism and Americanism which overtly stress how “culture differs ... profoundly from one national setting” to another (Paxton,

215, 2004). In the formation of German-American regional identities, at least, two developed regional identities which went to war shared more in common than they are currently given credit for in either popular or academic conceptions. Such an insight, also contrary to the official government messages of the day on both sides, might very well be applicable to present themes of resolutely opposing identities, contrasting groups and conflicting regions. Instead, the similarity of any two opponents might be a clearer, more subtle starting point for further research in conflict studies and understanding armed clashes between political and cultural identities.

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Notes

1. Before it was purposefully sunk to avoid just such an eventuality.
2. "Er war fremd zu mir."
3. "Ich bin Amerikaner, das geht doch mich nichts an."
4. *Das Leben eines Kolonisten und Auswanders in Amerika*, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183138, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
5. *Deutsche Weihnacht auf dem St. Marcos Pass*, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183149, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
6. *Abschrift*, Texas, 1937, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183150, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
7. *Abschrift*, Newark, November 1938, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183154, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Kameradschaft USA*, BA, *Fotokopien von Schreiben der NSDAP an Andreas Gissibil, Leiter der „Freie Vereinigung Teutonia“ in Chicago, 1925-1932*, 0183228, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
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13. *Ibid.*
14. *Abschrift*, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183153, Lichterfelde, Berlin.
15. "The ill-fated war did the German language [a] fearful demolition. Early, one had very German communities, today one finds but few." *Abschrift*, Newark, November 1938, BA, *Abschriften von Briefen deutscher Auswanderer in den USA 1851-1872, 1935-1938*, 0183154, Lichterfelde, Berlin.