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Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I

Frederick Luebke

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Foreword

Minority History, once a euphemism disguising unpleasant or intractable social realities, has come in our time to be viewed as a source of American vitality and self-illumination. In an era when American society has been undergoing a vast realignment of its human resources, institutions, and habits of mind, Americans are more prone than ever to see that the experiences of ethnic, regional, social, economic, occupational, political, religious, intellectual and other well-defined groups have spotlighted and personalized strategic problems in the American past.

The Minorities in American History series will encompass a whole range of such group experiences. Each is intended to illuminate brightly a critical event, movement, tradition, or dilemma. By so doing, these books will individualize the problems of a complex society, giving them both broad pertinence and sharp definition. In addition, the special insights afforded by the increasingly sophisticated methodology of the "new history" will be reflected in an expanding list of ethnohistory studies where sociological theory and quantitative analysis will further inform, document, and shape the dramatic narrative.

Bonds of Loyalty is a model account and analysis of German-America during World War I. Combining a traditional narrative with the most refined social science meth-

ods, it is the first fully-realized original synthesis to appear since 1940 depicting this imperfectly understood major ethnic group. Unlike earlier historians who concentrated on the political story, Frederick Luebke sees the war as the traumatic climax of an ethno-cultural struggle that long had festered just below the headlines. This is the story of the most numerous, the most diverse, and the most influential non-English speaking ethnic group in nineteenth-century America in an era of supreme tragedy for all Americans, but especially for Americans of German origin. Lutheran, Catholic, Jew and sectarian, church German and club German, these immigrants, so authoritatively portrayed by Luebke, came from every province and principality in central Europe where the continent's religio-political crises had registered with unusual force and intensity. With deftness and economy, Luebke makes vivid the predicament of the only large nineteenth-century immigrant group in the United States with a cultural legacy that matched the dominant English heritage. Ironically, the very acceptability of German-Americans as Americans, their high rating as fellow Teutons, and the flattering stereotypes Anglo-Americans had of them encouraged an assertive ethnic counter culture that actively challenged American folkways even as a whole series of issues symbolically dramatized the clash of cultures. Contests over Sabbatarianism, prohibition, woman suffrage, compulsory education, and immigration restriction seemed to cast doubt on the worthiness of German-Americans and repeatedly jeopardized what appeared to be the most successful achievement in everyday cultural pluralism that the nation had ever experienced. When their very "Americanness" drove German-Americans to embark on political action to defend their life style, they could not quite avoid being identified in the popular mind with the power politics of Wilhelmine Germany. With the outbreak of war, the new distinction between the hyphenated Teuton and the unhyphenated Anglo-Saxon would strain relations between the racial Teutonic cousins to the breaking point as mounting

fear and distrust played havoc with a multi-ethnic America that divided its sympathies among the warring nations of Europe.

In this book, Professor Luebke brings to bear an unequaled understanding of German-America as well as a seasoned command of the most refined research methods in ethno-political and demographic history. Blending a discriminating, rich factuality with a masterful knowledge of the relations between cultural patterns and social attitudes, this outstanding scholar of German-America meticulously explores the ultimate as well as the immediate impact of World War I on every phase of German-American life. Clearly this important study in its analytic sweep and suggestiveness, in its sober separation of stereotype from reality raises key questions about the dynamics of a multi-ethnic nation and of the relationship between individual freedom and pluralism in a world in constant flux that are only beginning to be charted and understood with depth and sensitivity.

Moses Rischin, Series Editor
San Francisco State University

Preface

This book is an effort to explain why American society lashed out at its German element during World War I. Ever since colonial times, Americans had received German immigrants gladly and regarded them highly. Yet when the United States entered the war against Germany in 1917, people were swept into a strong wave of anti-German hysteria. Citizens of German origin were individually harassed and persecuted, German ethnic organizations were attacked, and serious efforts were made to eliminate German language and culture in the United States.

The crisis of war did not by itself create conflicts between the native-born and the German-Americans. Rather, war was the occasion that converted latent tensions into manifest hostility. For this reason little understanding is gained by identifying scapegoats, either German-American extremists, who allegedly provoked the government to repressive measures, or superpatriots, who by their immoderate rhetoric may have incited Americans to riot. Instead, one must search for the roots of the conflict in the varied social and cultural characteristics of the German immigrants and in their interaction over several decades with dominant elements of American society. In my attempt to penetrate the bewildering diversity of the German ethnic group in

America I have pursued distinctions in attitude toward German language and culture, believing that differences in behavior during the World War I period may best be understood in such terms.

These variations, in turn, are basic to an understanding of the stereotypes through which the native-born perceived the Germans in their midst. They help to explain why the early twentieth-century view, with its emphasis on "hyphenism" (implying divided political loyalties), fits only a fraction of the German-American population. They also illuminate the diversity of German ethnic response to the European war during the neutrality period and show why the American war with Germany was so much more difficult for some German-Americans than for others. Finally, these distinctions are related to the impact of the war on ethnic institutions and explain why some, notably the churches and their auxiliary agencies, were able to weather the storm and transform themselves into acceptably American institutions and why others, chiefly those dedicated to the maintenance of German language and culture, atrophied in the postwar period.

There has been a tendency in the past for immigration historians to interpret the experience of a given ethnic group on the basis of evidence drawn from leadership sources. They have assumed, for example, that the editorial stance of German-language publications reflected commonly held attitudes and that persons capable of gaining attention in the newspapers were somehow typical of the group. Thus, the pro-German pronouncements of officials of the National German-American Alliance during the neutrality period were always sure-fire copy, while citizens of German origin whose opinions were consonant with those of the majority were unable to attract journalistic attention. By relying excessively on elite-type sources, some historians were led to assume a uniformity of attitude and behavior among the Germans that had little basis in fact.

Other historians have sought to resolve the difficulty by using the term "German-American" in a limited sense, applying it only to those members of the group who actively promoted German culture in the United States or who openly sympathized with Germany. Such a narrowed usage, however, presents other problems. When superpatriots reacted against German-American chauvinists during the war, they heeded no such distinctions. To illustrate, even though German Mennonites were the antithesis of the "professional German-Americans," to use Theodore Roosevelt's term, they were the most grievously abused of any German culture group in the United States. Moreover, the limited definition suggests that to be German-American was to be un-American, that immigrants could be American only when they conformed to established patterns or accepted Anglo-American norms as their own. This usage thus denies implicitly the pluralist character of American society and culture. For these reasons I employ the term "German-American" in its typical nineteenth-century sense to include all persons who by reason of their place of birth, name, speech, or other behavior were identified by Americans as being German in some way.

Finally, I must note my disagreement with those historians who have concluded that periods of rampant nativism (including the era of World War I) hindered the assimilation of the Germans by frightening them into a withdrawal from the main currents of American life, thereby extending the vitality of their immigrant institutions and crystalizing their cultural isolation. I believe that nativism generally had the opposite effect. Hostility and intolerance caused most Germans to perceive their ethnicity as a source of social deprivation or discomfort. A few reacted by asserting their Germanness with new vigor; naturally they captured the attention of contemporary observers and historians. But many others sought to slough off their ethnicity and accommodate themselves to the new standards as painlessly as possible. Still others were apathetic and

sought to avoid tension-producing situations. Much evidence demonstrates that Germans generally assimilated rapidly even though their enormous numbers encouraged them to create strong ethnic institutions and to sustain them beyond the period of their utility as agencies to ease the movement of individuals into American society. In my view, the Germans had a rich ethnic life in America in spite of, rather than because of, recurring waves of nativist intolerance.

The intellectual debts I have incurred in writing this book are beyond reckoning. They arise from many conversations and much correspondence, not only with historians but also with persons whose memories remain seared by events of the First World War. But I am especially obligated to those scholars whose books and articles have led me to understand the history of Germans in America as social process. They have fundamentally conditioned my point of view and hence my interpretation. I have also learned much from several graduate students at the University of Nebraska who joined me in studying the historical problem treated in this book. Sarah Rosenberg, Laurence Pizer, and James Potter produced thoughtful seminar papers; Clifford L. Nelson and Burton W. Folsom II wrote excellent theses. My colleagues at the University of Nebraska have also been generous in their willingness to discuss and criticize ideas and interpretations. I am grateful to Professor Lloyd Ambrosius of my department and Professor Robert Swierenga of Kent State University, who read portions of the manuscript, and to Professor Paul Kleppner of Northern Illinois University, who read the entire manuscript. Each offered valuable criticisms. I acknowledge a special debt to Professor Moses Rischin of San Francisco State University, who has patiently counseled and encouraged me since May 1969, when he responded to a letter outlining the idea for the book. In no sense, of course, are these scholars responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation that remain in these pages.

My foremost obligation is to my wife, Norma Wukasch Luebke, who has made this book possible in many ways. Most directly, however, I benefited from her keen editorial skills, including her ability to grace criticism with charming wit. This volume is affectionately dedicated to her.

Lincoln, Nebraska F.C.L.