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The German-American Community during World War II

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For approximately thirty years in the twentieth century, Americans considered Germany a dangerous enemy, courtesy of the two world wars that Germany had a hand in starting. This attitude is understandable, given the magnitude of bloodshed and suffering caused by the monstrous conflicts. Because of this anti-German mindset, a question arose regarding the loyalty of the German-Americans in the United States during the war years and the interwar period. Anti-German hysteria gripped the United States during World War I and the extent of this frenzy to purge the nation of anything remotely German has been well-documented and discussed in the last century. The topic of German-American treatment in World War II, however, has been discussed much less than the anti-Teutonic witch hunts of 1917 and 1918. The exclusion, persecution, and internment of German-Americans during World War II was not as public as during World War I, but still had a significant impact on the German-American community. The American public was extremely concerned that the German-Americans would pledge their loyalty to their beloved Germany and treacherously sabotage the United States.

If one were to ask a German-American in the 1930s if he supported the Nazis, the answer would most probably be in the negative. Like most Americans, the majority of German-Americans found the Nazi ideology repugnant and abhorrent.¹ However, some German-Americans favored the Nazis for non-ideological reasons. They were enthusiastic nationalists, retaining a pride of and love for Germany, and, consequently, approved of the Nazis' attempts to rebuild the nation and increase its prestige after a decade of humiliating confusion. As Albert Zimmer, a Nazi leader in Cincinnati, noted, "Of course, most of these people (Germans in Cincinnati) do not agree with Hitler, but at the same time Hitler represents Germany to them. And they will not tolerate any criticism, verbal or written, of Germany. They consider it a reflection on themselves."²

Aside from a non-ideological approval, many German-Americans were indifferent to the Nazis.³ This group tended to be well assimilated into American culture. While they maintained cultural, culinary, and linguistic ties to Germany, their devotion to their motherland usually did not extend to political matters. Their love of Germany had little, if anything, to do with foreign policy, imperialism, anti-Semitism, Pan-Germanism, or other Nazi ideas and policies.⁴ Accordingly, they often ignored the subject of the Nazis.⁵ Unfortunately, this silence communicated the wrong message to the American public at large. Silence communicates agreement, so the public interpreted the German-Americans' lack of reaction to the Nazis as an implicit gesture of approval.

¹ Timothy J. Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II: An Ethnic Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 15.

² Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴ Stephen Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag: A Biography of German American Internment and Exclusion in World War II* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 159.

⁵ Carl Wittke, "American Germans in Two World Wars," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, September 1943, 13.

That is not to say that all anti-Nazi German-Americans were mute. By 1938, with war on the horizon and American pro-Nazi organizations at the zenith of their influence, German-Americans were expected to publicly choose between Hitler's Germany and the United States.⁶ The time for neutrality was over. Eugene Grigat, leader of an anti-Nazi organization called Friends of German Democracy, realized the imperative need for a firm German-American response early on and called his fellows to action. "If we do not raise our voices in sincere and determined protest – coupled with action – we deserve to be suspect of being tacit Hitler admirers."⁷ The condemnation of the Nazis by German-Americans grew exponentially in the opening years of World War II as Nazi aggression and cruelty became increasingly apparent. By December 1941, any sympathy that the ordinary German-American might have felt for the Nazis had utterly dissipated. This distaste for Nazism was indicated and confirmed by the massive enlistment of German-Americans in the armed forces after the United States entered the war. One-third of American troops were German-Americans and many of them fought in Europe against the very regime they were accused of supporting.⁸

The evidence clearly shows that the majority of German-Americans were not supportive of the Nazis and their ideology, but there were some genuine Nazi sympathizers among them. The German-American Nazi sympathizers coalesced into several organizations, the most prominent being *Der Amerikadeutscher Volksbund*, the German-American Bund (league). Commonly referred to as the Bund, the organization was an offshoot of the Nazi Party and led by Fritz Kuhn, an acerbic, recently naturalized German-American and self-styled *Bundsführer*.

⁶ John Arkas Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America: The Germans in the United States of America during the Nineteenth Century – and After* (1940; repr., New York: Arno, 1970), 301.

⁷ Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict*, 64.

⁸ J. G. Rosengarten, *The German-American Soldier in the Wars of the U.S.*, ed. Don Heinrich Tolzmann (1890: repr. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1996), 328.

Most of the Bund's members were German nationals, post-World War I naturalized immigrants, and young German-Americans who were disillusioned by the hardships of the Great Depression.⁹ The absence of German-American members who possessed long-term citizenship is significant, indicating that the Bund was a fringe movement and the vast majority of German-Americans had no use for it. Furthermore, the Bund remained a small organization. Its size is difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty because the Bund destroyed its membership lists when public opinion turned definitively against them after Hitler declared war on the United States.¹⁰ Contemporary estimates ranged anywhere from the Justice Department's 6,500 to Congressman Samuel Dickstein's 450,000,¹¹ while Kuhn himself placed the number just over 8,000 in April 1939.¹² Most modern researchers estimate that membership hovered around 10,000. With the German-American population in the United States being well over six million at the time, the Bund was a tiny fraction of the whole.¹³

Despite the Bund's small size, the Bundists were an incredibly vocal and visible group. With the benefit of hindsight, historians have concluded that the Bund was not a real threat to the nation, but that fact was not clear at the time.¹⁴ The Bundists held high-profile rallies, circulated blatantly pro-Nazi newspapers and propaganda, produced history books that showed the Nazis in a positive light, and publicly called for the conversion of the entire Western Hemisphere to Nazism, as Lore Ludwig noted in *Nation* in 1937. "Leader Kuhn announced in his German weekly on April 22 that all Nazi organizations in America, Canada, and South America will

⁹ Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America*, 302.

¹⁰ Susan Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Menlo Park, CA: Markgraf, 1990), 86.

¹¹ Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II*, 27.

¹² Canedy, *America's Nazis*, 86.

¹³ Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America*, 60.

¹⁴ Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II*, 52.

cooperate in the future.”¹⁵ They were the face of American Nazism and succeeded in projecting an image of strength and rigorous vitality to the public, which drove the public’s fear of encroaching Nazism to new heights. Millions of non-Bundist German-Americans did not appreciate the Bund portraying German-Americans in such a pro-Nazi light. The actions of a few radicals cast the veil of suspicion over the entire group.¹⁶ The Bund permanently disbanded after Pearl Harbor, but the damage to the public’s perception of the German-American community was done.

The American public generally viewed German-Americans with suspicion and distrust, which only increased as Hitler and his followers grew more powerful. Most of the media coverage of German-Americans in the 1930s focused on the Bundists and other various Nazi sympathizers, reinforcing the negative opinions of many Americans.¹⁷ Hollywood capitalized on the public’s interest, producing spy dramas depicting Germans and German-Americans as despicable fascist spies and saboteurs, intent on bringing about the downfall of the United States.¹⁸ Their purpose was to warn Americans about the Nazi threat. It was an admirable goal, but the films amplified the already rampant fear sweeping through the country.

The public’s inability to distinguish between maintaining German culture and supporting the Nazis further alienated German-Americans from the rest of the population. Many Americans saw the German-Americans’ retention of their German culture and language as a confirmation of pro-Nazi leanings. For some, speaking German or English with a German accent was enough to

¹⁵ Ludwig Lore, “What are American Nazis Doing?” *Nation* 144, no. 23 (June 5, 1937): 637.

¹⁶ Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (New York: Viking, 1980), 56.

¹⁷ Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II*, 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

condemn a German-American as a Nazi sympathizer.¹⁹ The idea of dual allegiance, i.e. maintaining ties with Germany while still living as a loyal American citizen, was incomprehensible to many U.S. citizens.²⁰ Any expressed sentimentality, nostalgia, or pride in German achievements indicated that the speaker was an avid supporter of Hitler and his agenda, despite his usually harmless intentions. In a survey taken in early 1942, 82% of respondents thought that the Germans were the ethnic group most likely to maintain secret loyalty to a foreign government, compared with 29% for Italians and 24% for Japanese.²¹ Clearly, people of German ethnicity were most likely to have their loyalty scrutinized.

Adding fuel to the fires of suspicion and distrust was the fear of a Fifth Column of Nazi agents in America, who would sabotage American industry, factories, infrastructure, and transportation systems in the event of war with the Third Reich. German nationals and German-Americans had difficulty finding and keeping jobs, especially in the defense industry, because of this widespread fear.²² While this may sound like a strange conspiracy theory to modern ears, it was a real and immediate fear at the time. In a July 1940 Fortune Poll, 70% of respondents believed that Germany had established a Fifth Column in the United States.²³ Even J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, believed strongly that a dastardly collaboration of Nazi agents existed within the country's borders. He claimed in 1940, "that there is a Fifth Column which has already started to march is an acknowledged reality. That it menaces America is an established fact."²⁴ Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt was convinced that Nazi saboteurs were active, as

¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Arnold Kramner, *Undue Process: The Untold Story of America's German Alien Internees* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 57.

²² Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict*, 124.

²³ Ibid., 116.

²⁴ Kramner, *Undue Process*, 23.

he expressed at a press conference in May 1940. “Of course we have got this fifth column thing, which is altogether too widespread around the country.”²⁵

However, it appears those fears were unfounded. A few incidents, such as fires set on the French ship *Normandie* in New York Harbor in early 1942, could possibly have been caused by saboteurs, but none of the incidents could be definitively labeled as sabotage and could have easily been the fault of careless workers.²⁶ In fact, U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle and the FBI announced that no acts of sabotage had been committed, as historian Carl Wittke noted in September 1943.²⁷ The only confirmed saboteurs ever caught were eight German spies who were deposited on American shores by U-boats in June 1942. Their mission was to sabotage the American defense industry, but the leaders turned themselves and their conspirators in to the American authorities within a few days of arrival.²⁸ Five of the would-be saboteurs were executed as a warning to Nazi Germany and other potential saboteurs. That event was the beginning and end of attempted Nazi sabotage in the United States during the war.

Although less hysterical than the fears Americans harbored about Nazi-sponsored sabotage, the fear of Nazi spies in America was another, more legitimate concern held by the American people. This fear had some grounding in reality. The FBI knew of a handful of Nazi spy rings in the late 1930s and into 1941, organized by various Nazi agencies, e.g. the Abwehr, the Gestapo, the German Foreign Ministry, and others.²⁹ The spy rings were broken up by the FBI before the United States’ participation in the war began in earnest, but they were able to

²⁵ Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible*, 43.

²⁶ Stan Cohen, Don DeNevi, and Richard Gay, *They Came to Destroy America: The FBI Goes to War Against Nazi Spies & Saboteurs Before and During World War II* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories, 2003), iii.

²⁷ Wittke, “American Germans in Two World Wars,” 15.

²⁸ Cohen, DeNevi, and Gay, *They Came to Destroy America*, 44.

²⁹ William Breuer, *Hitler’s Undercover War: The Nazi Espionage Invasion of the U.S.A.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 199.

steal a number of pre-war military secrets and communicate them to Berlin. Interestingly, very few German-Americans wanted anything to do with the Nazi spies. The great majority of the spies were sent directly from Germany, and the German-Americans they tried to recruit often balked and refused to cooperate. For instance, the Nazi spies attempted to recruit eighteen German-American journalists to help produce propaganda for the purpose of converting the German-American community to Nazism. Every single journalist refused.³⁰ Certainly, some German-Americans did help the spies, but the vast majority remained steadfastly loyal to the United States.

Because of the FBI, based on this outstanding concern about potential sabotage and subversion on the part of America's German element, initiated a round-up of all German nationals and German-Americans they deemed to be dangerous and subversive following Pearl Harbor. This plan was initiated less than a day after the bombing, three days before Hitler's declaration of war on the United States.³¹ The FBI had started compiling a list in 1939, monitoring the activities of German-Americans suspected to sympathize with the Nazis.³² Arrests continued after the FBI's initial sweep, and the criteria for suspected disloyalty were embarrassingly flimsy. Subversive activities included, but were not limited to, association with other German-Americans, having family in the German military, anti-war sentiment, any previous travels to Germany, possession of any Nazi symbols, and contact with family members in Germany.³³ Anonymous informants, as well as reports from irate ex-wives and business partners, were considered reliable sources of information by the FBI, despite their bias and

³⁰ Ibid., 100.

³¹ Kramner, *Undue Process*, 33.

³² Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II*, 133.

³³ Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag*, 15.

uncorroborated hearsay.³⁴ The FBI's paranoia resulted in the detainment of thousands of innocent German-Americans alongside a diminutive handful of genuine Nazi sympathizers.

The methods the FBI employed to weed out the innocent from the guilty were stained with paranoia as well. The arrestees were given no due process, not charged with any crimes, not permitted to have legal counsel, and the pertinent evidence was seldom scrutinized.³⁵ The final verdict of loyalty was pronounced by the Justice Department, and it often did not favor the arrestees. There were a few cases in which naturalized citizens had their citizenship fully revoked because of perceived disloyalty.³⁶ A series of Alien Hearing Boards were eventually established to give the arrestees a chance to appeal for release, but the standards were not uniform from board to board, resulting in far more imprisoned German-Americans than the situation warranted.³⁷

A total of 10,905 German-Americans and German nationals were ultimately interned in camps for the duration of the war.³⁸ Most were not Nazi sympathizers, with former internees estimating that fifteen to twenty percent of the internees were genuine Nazis. However, it is impossible to know how many were a threat to national security.³⁹ The Nazis did not mix well with the other internees, as noted by Ivan Williams, the camp commander of Camp Kenedy in Texas. "For many of the interned Germans, it is the first time they have had any direct experience with hard-core Nazis, and they find they have little in common with them."⁴⁰ Nazi or not, the internees would not taste freedom for several years. Most were released soon after the

³⁴ Kramner, *Undue Process*, 11.

³⁵ Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag*, 296.

³⁶ Kramner, *Undue Process*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

Nazi regime formally capitulated in early May 1945, but there were still 2,016 German-Americans and German nationals imprisoned in July of the same year. The last internees would not be released until late 1948.⁴¹

The widespread, pervasive suspicion of German-Americans and their consequent internment is a sad chapter in American history. On the whole, German-Americans very rarely compromised their loyalty to the United States, strong though their devotion might have been to Germany, their Motherland. The vitriol and distrust they received was rarely warranted, but they endured it resiliently and did not hold it against their chosen home. The question of their loyalty, as a group, during the twentieth century's most vicious conflict is clearly answered. Despite the doubts of most other Americans, the German-Americans did not waver in their loyalty to the United States of America.

About the author

Monica Forsthoefel is a sophomore history major at Franciscan University of Steubenville. History has been her passion since her childhood and her main area of study is the American Civil War, with World War II as a close second.

⁴¹ Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag*, 153.

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