

GHOSTS OF THE RHINE

Anti-German hysteria in Cincinnati in 1917 and its vestiges today

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by Jerry Kathman
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Nineteenth century
postcard of Over-the-
Rhine.

The joke goes: “Where would we be without humor?” The punch line: “In Germany.”

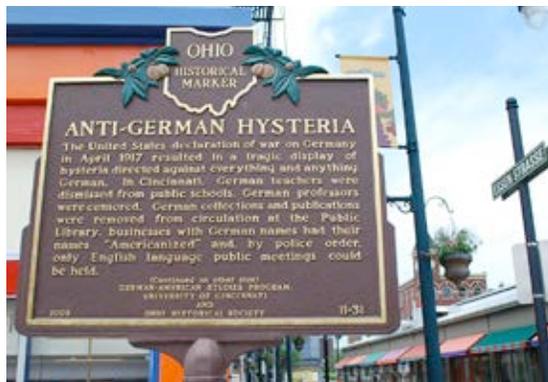
The stereotype of the efficient but humorless German lingers as the horrors of the twentieth century and darker images of the German stereotype fade. Germany continues its slow march toward its emerging status as a normal, if boring, country.

This is progress. Twenty-five years ago, as German reunification was underway, Margaret Thatcher, not celebrated for her wit, was asked a simple question. Germany had just won the World Cup, beating England, and the press wanted to know how she felt about losing to Germany at Britain’s national sport. “I shouldn’t worry too much,” Mrs. Thatcher replied, “We’ve beaten them twice this century at theirs!”

The negative image of Germany is certainly understandable given the atrocities of World War II. In the United States, however, the negative stereotype of Germans did not begin at that time. Rather it surfaced suddenly and dramatically as America was about to enter World War I. It has been described by historians as a period of “anti-German hysteria.”

To understand how this hysteria was manifest in Cincinnati, we need travel no farther than to our beloved Findlay Market in the heart of our most German of neighborhoods—the oddly named “Over-the-Rhine.” English speakers south of the Miami and Erie Canal mockingly called the area to the north “Over-the-Rhine” because of the concentration of German speakers there. The name stuck.

On the north side of the market where Pleasant Street intersects Findlay Street stands an Ohio Historical Marker, which tells the story of this hysteria. When war was declared in 1917, Cincinnati was not immune from the



Ohio historical marker at Findlay Market.

sudden national hatred of all things German, in spite of the fact that more than half of our citizens were immigrants from Germany or descendants of German immigrants. The plaque reads:

The United States declaration of war on Germany in April 1917 resulted in a tragic display of hysteria directed against everything and anything German. In Cincinnati, German teachers were dismissed from public schools, German professors were censored, German collections and

publications were removed from circulation at the Public Library, businesses with German names had their names “Americanized” and, by police order, only English language public meetings could be held.

On the back side of the plaque it continues:



As a result of the anti-German hysteria during World War I, name changing became the rage. The Cincinnati City Council followed the trend by changing German street names on April 9, 1918. Among

those changed were: German Street to English Street, Bismarck Street to Montreal Street, Berlin Street to Woodrow Street, Bremen Street to Republic Street ... (the list goes on)

Some of the actions taken to eradicate all-things German were comical. Pretzels were no longer found on bar counters in Over-the-Rhine, and on restaurant menus, yes, sauerkraut was suddenly called liberty slaw (some things never change).

On a more tragic note, Ernst Kunwald, the music director of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, was marched from the podium and later arrested. President Woodrow Wilson had issued a series of regulations that imposed restrictions on German-born residents of the United States over the age of 14. Some 250,000 people were required to register at their local post office, and to carry a registration card at all times. Some 6,300 such aliens were arrested, interrogated and investigated. A total of over 2,000 were incarcerated for the remainder of the war, including the maestro.

A street marker on
Stonewall street in
Over-the-Rhine.

The program was managed by the Enemy Alien Registration section of the Department of Justice, headed by an ambitious 22-year-old named J. Edgar Hoover.

As Tony Covatta shared in his paper last month, the stereotype of the barbaric Hun threatening “Pax Romana” is embedded in the master narrative of Western civilization. More recently, the discussion around the specific nature of the German stereotype has been conducted more continuously and intensely here in America than anywhere else in the world—not surprising perhaps given the large number of Americans with German heritage. According to a recent census, 46 million Americans claim German ancestry, including me.

For most of our nation’s history, the contribution of German culture was celebrated. In the century before World War I there were, for example, many links between our great academic institutions. Almost 10,000 young Americans matriculated in German universities. Both Harvard and Columbia had exchange programs with Berlin University.

The first German settlement in America was founded in 1683 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. By 1747, the community had become so significant that Benjamin Franklin prepared a pamphlet in which he praised their courage in his desire to win their support for the defense of the Pennsylvania frontier. As the colony grew to 45,000, the Germans threatened to outnumber their English neighbors. Franklin’s growing anxiety about this resulted in a recommendation that this “alien” community could be diminished by means of German women marrying Anglophone men.

The early reputation of the “Pennsylvania Dutch” as industrious and thrifty was bolstered by the respected physician Benjamin Rush in his book *An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania* (1789).

In the nineteenth century, American writers were mostly positive in their observations about Germans. The benevolence and sociability of the German people is apparent in Louisa May Alcott's best-selling novel, *Little Women*, published in 1868. Samuel Clemens declared his preference for German-speaking countries over those of France and Italy in his travel book *A Tramp Abroad*, published in 1880.

Our own Harriet Beecher Stowe, however, in her *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), is a bit more circumscribed. She took offense at the seemingly unrestrained sensuality of some mythological paintings in the galleries in Dresden. Arriving in Cologne, however, she was overwhelmed by the beauty of the Gothic cathedral there.

W.E.B. DuBois was attracted to the reputation of Berlin University with which his Harvard teachers were in close contact. In marked contrast to his experiences in America, DuBois had no difficulties on account of his skin color during his time in Germany. Interestingly, he saw the effort to unify Germany underway during the time of his visit as a model for constructing a collective identity for African Americans.

By the turn of the twentieth century, anti-German sentiment was rising. Albert B. Faust's book *The German Element in the United States* was published in 1909, a time when opinions of Germany were at a turning point. By then, growing concerns about German militarism and imperialism were replacing the positive images of Germany most Americans held.

Kaiser Wilhelm II had begun to take a more aggressive stance on foreign policy. German and American interests clashed in the Pacific and Venezuela. Germany's image in America declined further with the outbreak of war in 1914. German atrocities in Belgium, the sinking of passenger ship *Lusitania* and the German use of submarines to curb Allied shipping

were among the causes of a rise in anti-German rhetoric in America.

By the time diplomatic relations were severed between Germany and the US, President Wilson and his government officials had begun to question the loyalty of German-Americans. The President spoke disapprovingly of “hyphenated Americans” whose loyalty he claimed was divided. Thus the hysteria began.

As to the loyalty of those in question, as noted, some German nationals and others were jailed with cause. The vast majority of German-Americans however, were patriots and many fought valiantly for the US. They were led, ironically, by a German-American general whose family name Pförschin was earlier changed to Pershing.

Anti-German feelings arose again in World War II, but the loyalty of German-Americans was not questioned nearly to the degree found in the previous war.

And once again, German-Americans led the war effort. A descendant of the Pennsylvania Dutch, Dwight Eisenhower commanded our forces in Europe. Admiral Chester Nimitz of the US Navy and General Carl Spaatz of the Army Air Corps were by Eisenhower’s side.

I recall the joke I first heard as a kid: “We won the war because our Germans were better than their Germans.”

As for Cincinnati, our German roots are of course deep. A German family was among the first eleven families to settle in what became Cincinnati. A German-American, David Ziegler, was elected our city’s first mayor in 1802. Most German immigrants in Cincinnati were educated or skilled craftsmen, and they quickly became successful professionals, artisans

and tradesmen here. Some of you, I suspect, remember the Kathman Shoe Repair Shop, an institution in downtown Cincinnati serving the carriage trade for generations. Yes, I am a descendant of German cobblers.

For many of us with German surnames, whose families settled in Over-the-Rhine, the story of our “Germanness” is one of profound ambivalence. We are indifferent to our German heritage. When I discovered my great-grandfather’s German language school certificate from Saint Mary’s Church, located at 13th and Clay Street in Over-the Rhine, it struck me as odd and foreign. My heart didn’t swell with pride.

How different this reaction is from the way the Irish, the Italians, the Greeks and so many other ethnic groups approach their heritage.



My great-grandfather's school certificate from Saint Mary's Church, written in German.

Several explanations come to mind as I ponder this. First of all, my German-American father married an Irish girl, an act that would have been unlikely a generation or two before. Ethnic Catholic parishes were fading away as our grandparents moved out of the crowded Over-the-Rhine and migrated to places like Price Hill and beyond.

In the 1950s my west side parish, St. Martin in Cheviot, had kids with German, Irish, Italian, French, Spanish and Polish names. Our family identity was grounded in Catholicism, but no particular sense of Germanness was part of my upbringing. No clever German phrases were used in our household when the English language had no perfect word. Given Germany's

wretched images from the recent war and the Holocaust, no one was all that interested in exploring their roots in post-war, mid-century America.

And besides, there was no German nation when most of our German-speaking ancestors left the Old World. My great-great-grandfather's naturalization papers, which cousins in Philadelphia uncovered a few years ago, state that to become an American citizen, in 1851, he was required to renounce his allegiance to the Duke of Oldenburg. It took another 30 years for Germany to be forged into a nation by Otto von Bismarck.

It all seems so long ago, doesn't it? The Over-the-Rhine of today is a thriving young community with restaurants and overpriced lofts stretching block after block—with no end in sight. The old German neighborhood has suddenly become cool. In my lifetime, I never imagined using the words "German" and "cool" in the same sentence. The ghosts of the old German neighborhood wouldn't know what to make of it all.

And in a most ironic move, given my stated ambivalence toward my German heritage, I, along with a few other investors, backed two young entrepreneurs, Bob Bonder and Bryant Goulding, as they launched the most German of businesses, a brewery in the skeleton of the old 19th century Moerlein bottling plant in the heart of Over-the-Rhine. They named it "Rhinegeist," which translates to "ghost of the Rhine." I brought some samples tonight in the hope that it will positively impact your reaction to this paper. We've come a long way since the days when anti-German hysteria had Cincinnati in a tizzy.

And what of Germany itself today? Germans woke up recently to giddy headlines in their newspapers declaring, according to a BBC poll, that "Germany is the most popular country in the world!" You could almost imagine Angela Merkel doing

her happy dance, or sounding like Sally Fields at the Oscars, joyfully crying out, “They like us, they really like us!”

In truth, a careful examination of the data reveals that of the 16 countries in the study, 26,000 people in 25 countries simply thought that the image of Germany was “mainly positive”—something short of the “most popular country in the world” claim. A closer read suggests that people really meant that they admired Germany’s economy. Oh well ...

Even this didn’t last long. Soon, another poll by a respected US research center declared that Germans are still the most arrogant people in Europe—but they are trustworthy.

Two popular beers from a new brewery in Over-the-Rhine named “Rhinegeist” or “ghost of the Rhine.”



Gentlemen, let’s at least drink to that.