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ANTI-GERMAN SENTIMENT IN THE UNITED STATES  
1914 - 1917

by

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## CONTENTS

	Page Nos.
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 - PUBLIC OPINION, THE PRESS AND THE VOCABULARY OF PROPAGANDA	5
Chapter 2 - ANTI-GERMAN SENTIMENT IN THE UNITED STATES:	47
(i) Attitudes towards Germany, her people, and culture	
(ii) Attitudes towards German-Americans	
Chapter 3 - EVENTS WHICH INCREASED ANTI-GERMAN SENTIMENT: FOREIGN	113
(i) Invasion of Belgium	
(ii) Atrocities	
(iii) Submarine Warfare	
Chapter 4 - EVENTS WHICH INCREASED ANTI-GERMAN SENTIMENT: DOMESTIC	162
(i) German-Americans and the arms trade	
(ii) Spies and Sabotage	
(iii) 1916 Election	
Chapter 5 - 1917 AND WAR	209
Chapter 6 - TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION	230

	Page Nos.
POSTSCRIPT	247
Appendix I                      STATISTICAL MATERIAL	252
Appendix II                     CIRCULATION FIGURES	257
Appendix III                    CARTOONS AND ANTI-GERMAN RHETORIC	260
A NOTE ON SOURCES	274
BIBLIOGRAPHY	277

INTRODUCTION

The concept of America as an asylum for the oppressed and the poor had become a deep-rooted conviction even before the Revolutionary War. After Independence, this conviction became part of the national ideals of the new United States. "E pluribus unum", the motto chosen by Jefferson, Adams and Franklin for the great seal of the Union, expressed not only the union of thirteen colonies, but also American faith that this new land would bring unity out of diversity; and the democratic values incorporated in the Declaration of Independence postulated an equal share for all in the fullness of American life. An anonymous author wrote in a popular magazine in the 1839's:

The virgin world in which we dwell demands of the Old World but two influences - Men and Money ... This has ever been the asylum, the refuge, of every people of the Old World ... Well, let them come!(1)

And so they did come, all through the nineteenth century, "the hunted of every crown and creed", (2) fleeing from political, religious and economic disadvantages in Europe. They crowded through the Golden Door, some remaining close inside it, others pressing on into the interior of this abundant land.

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(1) Quoted in Robert Ernst, "The Asylum of the Oppressed", South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. XL, January 1941, p. 5.

(2) Bayard Taylor, "The National Ode", William Rose Beret & Norman Cousins (eds.), The Poetry of Freedom, (New York, 1945), p. 413.

Of all the groups which came, the Germans were the most numerous. Artisans, tradesmen, farmers and highly trained professional men, they left their Fatherland in hundreds of thousands, and were welcomed in the United States as citizens with a valuable contribution to make to her national life. By 1910 there were eight and a quarter million of them. Each new wave of German immigrants settled principally in communities already populated by their fellow-countrymen. They soon gained a reputation for thrifty, honest, industrious and orderly living. At the same time, they insisted on their right to their beer gardens and Sunday entertainments. As the names Rheingold, Schlitz and Anheuser-Busch may suggest, many German brewmasters brought a generous measure of gemutlichkeit to American life. Americans generally were already familiar with the rich German contribution to Western culture, especially as thousands of Americans had received their education wholly or partly in German universities during the nineteenth century.

Until the first World War, there was little to suggest that the "melting pot" was not doing its work successfully by absorbing this large immigrant group into the mainstream of life in the United States. Despite the influence of various "nativist" groups, few Americans doubted that the democratic process was smoothly and efficiently turning Germans into Americans as a matter of course. But the events of the years

1914 to 1917 were to show how little assimilation or integration had really taken place. Anti-German sentiment in the United States became evident very soon after the outbreak of war, and it grew steadily during the years of neutrality, fanned to greater intensity by events at home and abroad. This anti-German feeling changed the American image of the German (and the German-American) from that of an industrious, honest, jovial, music-loving citizen to that of a disloyal "thing" that would not melt in the great pot. (1)

The purpose of this thesis is to illustrate, and if possible, to explain, this change in public opinion in the United States during the years of her neutrality from 1914 to 1917. It is not possible to explain fully any change in public opinion, nor can the historian even be sure that he has caught and evaluated correctly whatever change there was. However, the contemporary literature gives ample evidence of anti-German sentiment which increased as the war continued and the United States moved steadily towards intervention on the side of the Allies.

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(1) Cartoon to this effect in Life, 18 November 1915, pp. 942-3. See Appendix III. The concept of many nationalities "melting into a new race" in the United States began in the late 1770's when Michele-Guillaume de Crèveceour used the term in Letters from an American Farmer. The "melting pot" theory was well established by 1914, and was constantly referred to by writers who discussed the failure of German-Americans to become "real" Americans. At this time, the image was not yet discredited; the melting pot was simply not working as well as expected. See, for example, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot", Nation, 18 and 25 February 1915.

For many Americans, especially those with a British heritage, there were two aspects to this anti-German feeling. The first was their reaction to the Kaiser's Germany and all that the "Fatherland" stood for. The second was their relationship with the Americans of German origin who made up part of their own nation. The antipathy of Americans towards the "new" belligerent Germany quickly manifested itself after August 1914, but it took longer for open antagonism towards German-Americans to develop. A number of events, both in the European war zone and in the United States, intensified this anti-German sentiment. In Europe, these events included the invasion of Belgium, the reports of atrocities on the battlefields, submarine warfare and other aspects of the Germans' war methods. In the United States anti-German feeling was increased by the German-Americans' attempts to stop the American arms trade with the Allies, the part they played in the 1916 Presidential election campaign, and a range of subversive or supposedly subversive activities. These events, combined with the highly coloured coverage given them by the English-language press, must be examined in detail in order to trace the overall change in public opinion. We must also look at American ideas about, and attitudes towards, Germany as a nation, and German-Americans as an immigrant group, before the outbreak of war, in order to see how these ideas and attitudes were affected by the events of the years 1914 to 1917.