“Read Our Articles in American Language:” World War I and German-American Identity in German-language Newspapers in Chicago

There were Germans, and there were Americans, but by the time the United States entered World War I, it was very hard to be a German-American. Anti-German hysteria and nativist American nationalism attempted to denigrate and suppress German-American culture, punishing any sympathy for Germany or German culture. These tales of wartime prejudice and division occupy such a prominent place in the history of German-Americans that it can be hard to believe the extent to which German-Americans were comfortable being both German and American, or the ways in which other Americans both tolerated and opposed these sentiments. Chicago is particularly apt place to investigate such tensions, as it hosted a large German population (in 1910, 19.5% of the city was German-born) with at least two large German-language newspapers, but was far from an ethnic enclave, making the city a site for potential conflict.[1] Examining English and German-language newspapers from the city can shed light on both differences in perspective and the construction of German-American identity.

When studying tensions between German-Americans and non-German-Americans in Chicago, comparing English and German-language newspapers of that city provides useful insights into the priorities of each community, giving numerous examples of how they expressed their own views and even how the different presses interacted with each other. A focus on the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the outbreak of war, and the sinking of the Lusitania allows a comparison of the newspapers' different biases and priorities in covering these divisive incidents. The German press, as might be expected, expends both more ink and more emotion on news of Germany and matters of German-American identity. Indeed, the *Illinois Staats-zeitung* (*ISZ*) and the *Abendpost*, Chicago's main German-language dailies, were unabashedly pro-

[1] Leslie V. Tischauser, *The Burden of Ethnicity: The German Question in Chicago, 1914-1941* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 1

German throughout their war coverage. What is more surprising, however, is the way Chicago's German-American press supported an identity that involved bonds of loyalty to both America and Germany. Although the sinking of the *Lusitania* resulted in a dramatic upswing of anti-German sentiment, English-speaking newspapers did not entirely exclude German-American voices. Through the early days of the war, the German newspapers of Chicago continued to engage with the English-speaking press in a desperate effort to convince them of Germany's righteousness while also promoting a particular ideal of German-American identity to their readers.

Chicago's German-American Community

In order to understand how Chicago's German-Americans engaged with their non-German fellow citizens and with their own identity, it is first necessary to look at Chicago's German-American community and examine the divisions that underlay the category of German-American. Albares notes that Chicago's German-Americans differed in religion, occupation, class, and politics. The community included Germans of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faith and prior to World War I, they had little record of voting as a bloc. Overall, Chicago's German-Americans were notably less homogenous than other European immigrant communities.[2] These divisions, however, did not prevent the formation of a cohesive ethnic community. Germans tended to settle on the North and Norwest sides, with a few scattered settlements on the South side. Germans were especially concentrated between North and Fuller avenues and in the

[2] Richard Paul Albares, "The Structural Ambivalence of German Ethnicity in Chicago," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1981, 2

Lincoln Park and Lakeview neighborhoods. In 1910, five of Chicago's then thirty-five wards were over one third German, indicating a high degree of ethnic concentration.[3]

However, by 1914, Chicago's German-American community was beginning to lose cohesion. Immigration had slowed in the preceding decades, slowly resulting in a more Americanized population. In 1910, the census counted 314,063 Chicagoans born in Germany or Austria as compared to 415,450 who were born in the United States to German parents.[4] Counting both first- and second-generation immigrants as German-Americans reveals a total German-American population of 729, 513, or a full third of Chicago's 1910 population.[5] However, it also reveals a community increasingly made up of German-Americans who had never been to the old country and might not even speak German.

Kirschbaum argues for the decline of German-American culture in the early twentieth century, citing a steady decrease in the founding of German-language publications. Although there were certainly many in the community who fought to keep German-American culture and identity alive, "the breakdown of Deutschtum was beginning to be evident at about the Turn of the Century [sic]."[6] This anxiety was reflected in the Chicago German-language newspaper the *Illinois Staats-zeitung*. The paper ran a regular feature called "German for Americans," which contained simple grammar lessons and practice exercises. Anyone who needed such lessons would not be able to read the newspaper, making it unlike that it was intended for Anglo-American adults. Instead, it was almost certainly meant as a means of preserving German culture

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[3] Andrew Jacke Townsend, "The Germans of Chicago," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1927, 13-15
[4] Townsend, 5
[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1910*, Published online June 15th, 1998, https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab14.txt (accessed June 10th 2019)
[6] Erik Kirschbaum, *The Eradication of German Culture in the United State: 1917-1918* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verein Stuttgart, 1986), 41;

among native born children. In fact, one *ISZ* article identifies preserving the German language among children as a reason for the newspaper's existence.[7]

Thus, the opinions and biases of Chicago's German-language press were not simply the natural outgrowth of German-American popular opinion, but a project aimed at reinforcing a slowly splintering community. Several scholars have pointed out that the German-Americans who ran the newspapers were not necessarily representative of the broader German-American community. Publishers of German-language papers, such as Horace Brand, who ran the *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, tended to be rich, somewhat chauvinistic, and very concerned about the Germanness of German-Americans.[8] It must not be forgotten that, though newspapers such as the *ISZ* may have been widely circulated, their content was often determined by elites with opinions and goals different from those of the general populace. Chicago's German-language newspapers cannot be read as a repository of average German-American opinions, though they can offer clues. Instead, they reveal an attempt by certain members of the community to use World War I alongside other issues to promote a particular kind of German-American identity, one based on ties to the Fatherland back in Europe, confidence in the value of German culture, and a belief that Chicago and America at larger could support communities of truly German German-Americans.

German-Language Newspapers and the Onset of War

It is therefore unsurprising that Chicago's German-language newspapers gave more coverage, importance, and sympathy to events in Europe than did English-language papers. Chicago's German-American press differed not only in being politically pro-German, but in the

[7] *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, July 3rd 1914
[8] Luebke, 150; Tischauser 39-43

emotional weight given to events in German-speaking Europe. The German-language papers were written by and for a population that viewed Germany not in an abstract political sense, but as a cultural or literal homeland. Comparing newspaper coverage of Franz Ferdinand's assassination makes clear the difference in emphasis. While German papers tended to emphasize the tragedy of the event and solidarity between German leaders, the English-language papers wrote less and focused the potential political impact.

On July 1st, 1914, three days after the assassination, the event was still shocking, front page news for the prominent Chicago German-language newspaper, *Abendpost*. "More and More Gruesome! The Conspiracy to Murder the Successor Couple."" blared the headline, trying to catch the attention of German-Americans already appalled by the event.[9] The *Abendpost* was not unusual in using a gruesome murder to sell copy. However, the continued reportage on the assassination of the archduke and the focus on details rather than political consequences set the *Abendpost* apart from English-language newspapers.

This striking contrast is best shown in the way the *Tribune* covered the initial assassination. The *Tribune* called Franz Ferdinand "feared and disliked" in their headline, while the second sentence of a front page article says that, while it may seem heartless to say so, "it is impossible to deny the fact that his [Franz Ferdinand's] disappearance from the scene is calculated to diminish the tenseness of the situation and to make for peace both within and without the dual empire."[10] The *Tribune*'s lack of reverence for the deceased Austrian heir and willingness to jump to high politics immediately after acknowledging the Archduke's death

[9] "Immer Schauriger! Die Verschwörung zum Thronfolgepaarmorde," *Abendpost* (Chicago, IL) July 1, 1918. All quotations from the *Abendpost* and the *Illinois Staats-zeitung* are originally in German and translated by the author unless otherwise noted. Unfortunately, *Abendpost* issues for the days immediately following the assassination are not available.

[10] "Tragedy Will Bring Peace for Austria?" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL) June 29th, 1914

betray an entirely different set of priorities than Chicago's German-language newspapers. The difference is not so much a matter of being for or against Germany and Austria-Hungary. After all, the *Tribune* hoped that Ferdinand's death would bring peace to Austria-Hungary. Rather, it is the question of whether each newspaper expected it readers to care about a German royal family as people.

While the *Tribune* published articles about the potential political consequences of the assassination and then largely dropped the matter, the *ISZ* published front page articles on Ferdinand's funeral procession and Serbia's likely responsibility for the act until the fifth of July.[11] That both the *Abendpost* and the *ISZ* were preoccupied with following the course of the funeral and determining the details of the murder suggests a response of grief and personal interest rather than a purely political goal. Although the anti-Serbian sentiment potentially stoked by such coverage might have helped garner support for the war later, at this stage neither paper called for war, which, as evidenced by the *Tribune* headline, still seemed far from inevitable. Instead, the German-American newspapers were emphasizing a connection to Germany and Austria that could unite Chicago's German-American community.

Thus, merely calling Chicago's German-language press pro-German oversimplifies its goals and priorities. While the *Abendpost* and *ISZ* certainly did favor Germany in their coverage, as became especially apparent with the sinking of the Lusitania, this was not simply a political bias. Instead, it reflected the very real familial, cultural, and personal connections that many German-Americans had to the old country, and how those connections could unify the community. News about the Austro-Hungarian or German royal families, even news as tragic as

[11] See *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* (Chicago, IL) July 1st, 1914 – July 5th, 1914

an assassination, was one way the *ISZ* and *Abendpost* could appeal to Chicago's entire German-American community, overcoming regional and religious differences. These ties to the countries of Germany and Austria-Hungary rather than specific regions fed into a unique German-American identity. And while the mainstream American press often considered German-Americanism synonymous with political support for Germany, reality was more nuanced. In both war and cultural coverage, two categories of reportage that were not entirely distinct, Chicago's German press promulgated the idea of a German culture, both in Europe and in America, that could not only coexist with broader American culture, but partner with it, and even take a decisive role in shaping it.

One of the most explicit expressions of German-American identity and nationalism came from a meeting of the Deutsch-Amerikanischer Lehrerbund (German-American Teachers League), covered by both the *ISZ* and the *Abendpost*. A German-American named Henry Buttmann spoke before the first meeting about teaching German in American schools. It was not a political question, he claimed. Children would benefit from knowing two languages and "since German is, after English, the most important and most spoken culture-language[12] of the world." But there was also another reason, one specific to German-Americans. Buttmann proclaimed that, as German-Americans, they wanted their children to understand "that they should preserve Germanness through the common connection of our mother tongue"[13] German-Americans did have a sense of themselves as a minority ethnic group and wanted to preserve their language and community. However, they did not see German language or culture as something necessarily peculiar to them, or deriving its value solely from its place in their community. Buttmann was

[12] In original "Kultursprache," a term which might also be translated as "civilized language."
[13] "Empfang der deutschen Lehrer," *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, July 1st 1914

not merely proposing that German children learn German, but that the language be taught in American schools. He argued for teaching it not just on the basis of Chicago or America's German community, but as the second most important "culture-language" in the world. Indeed, only two days later the *ISZ* justified the value of German newspapers in teaching children German, since German and English "rule almost the entire globe."[14] German-Americans did not see their culture merely as one among many, but as a crucial influence on America and the world.

However, while German chauvinism certainly did exist in America, and was sometimes even expressed by explicitly referring to other cultures as lesser, it is important to examine how German-Americans harmonized the German part of their identity with loyalty to the United States.[15] In Buttmann's speech to the German-American Teacher League, he placed German as second to English. The goal, as he expressed it, was not to recreate Germany in the United States, but to give Americans access to German culture and ensure that German-American children could keep their heritage. German-Americans truly saw themselves as both German and American and could combine both parts of their identity in surprising ways. A case in point is a Fourth of July article demanding a relaxed immigration policy and an end to political machines. The article compared the Fourth of July to celebrations of the Battle of Leipzig, a victory against Napoleon which had similar nationalist resonances, though it did not prevent Napoleon from later returning. Both victories, the author argued, were incomplete. The American Revolution would only be complete after President Wilson stopped "playing the despot" allowed more immigrants into "this classical land of human rights" and political machines ceased to control

[14] *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, July 3rd 1914
[15] Kirschbaum, 48

democracy.[16] Written in German, the article drew from both German and American history to address a politically engaged German-American audience. The goal of relaxing immigration restrictions had special significance to a community with a large immigrant contingent. Political machines' subversion of free elections, on the other hand, was a problem relevant to everyone who took democracy as a basic American value. The writer expected German-Americans to be concerned about both issues.

Before America entered World War I, Chicago's German-American community did not see a conflict between loyalty to Germany and loyalty to the United States in a way that became unthinkable after America became a belligerent. Both the German-American press and the German parts of Chicago manifested their support for Germany and Austria. Upon the outbreak of the war, German flags "streamed from almost every building along North Avenue, the main street of Chicago's German belt." Two thousand young men gathered at a large German saloon on the North Side and volunteered to fight for Germany.[17] A mass meeting of the German-American alliance, though it decided the club should not take an active part in the war, was attended by up to ten thousand people and declared its full sympathy for the German and Austrian emperors. More mass meetings of the same kind followed on the North Side.[18] These expressions of support for Germany, like the coverage in German-language newspapers, were performed in the context of a close-knit ethnic community, whose concentration could give the appearance of unanimity. It cannot be known how many of Chicago's German-Americans felt ambivalent about the coming war, but the showing of German flags created an impression of united support. Likewise, newspaper articles blaming Russia for the expansion of the war,

[16] "Independence Day," *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* July 4th, 1914
[17] Tischauser, 7
[18] Townsend, 70

promising financial support for those young men who went to fight, and advertisements of suitcases "for men who are going to war" gave the impression of a community united around Germany in both printed word and public deed.[19] One such gathering was cancelled out of respect for Wilson's appeal to neutrality, perhaps indicating that leaders were sensitive to appearing too partisan. However, similar events continued throughout 1914 and 1915, with a "Germany Forever" rally on December 11th, 1914 and a four-thousand strong crowd for Bismarck Day on April 11th, 1915.[20] At least a portion of Chicago's German-Americans were coming out in enthusiastic support of Germany.

Both of Chicago's major German-language publications were overly optimistic about how compatible this support for Germany could be in an America that was sympathetic toward the allies. The *ISZ*, for example, posted several notices in late July and early August directing citizens of Germany, Austria-Hungary, or Switzerland to report to their respective consulates if they have military service obligations.[21] One article even anticipated that immigrants returning home to fight would reduce nativism, because their absence at factories would show the United States' dependence on foreign labor, without considering what such an event would do for nativist perceptions of immigrants' loyalty to the United States.[22] The *Abendpost* went even further, writing that only after a German victory could there be "a strong, true, and independent Americanism," freed from Anglo-Saxonism.[23] Such a statement was already naïve in 1914, but as the war went on, and especially after the sinking of the Lusitania, Chicago's English-language press would make an issue of German-American loyalty and even the validity of German culture.

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[19] *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, August 1st 1914; August 2nd 1914; August 3rd 1914
[20] Tischauser, 12; Townsend, 73
[21] *Illinois Staats-zeitung* July 29th, 1914; August 3rd, 1914; August 4th, 1914
[22] "Brauchen Wir Einwander?" *Illinois Staats-zeitung,* August 1st, 1914
[23] *Abendpost,* August 30th, 1914, quoted in Tischauser, 7

The story of German-Americanism in the English language press of Chicago, however, is not a story of unalloyed German-bashing. Although the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published several opinion pieces that called German-Americans disloyal or worse, it did not always impute disloyalty to the whole community. A 1914 article in the *Tribune* is a good example of earlier and less explicit portrayals of Germans as disloyal. Criticizing a professor who discussed anti-German sentiments, the article compared "German-American disputants" to German military strategists and ended by saying that "with many hyphenated Americans, the hyphen is not a tie but a division."[24] By linking German-Americans who participated in civil discourse to the German military and calling hyphenated identities divided, the article presented a politically defined idea of German-American identity. The article did not explicitly call German-Americans disloyal partisans, but came very close. But the idea of German-Americans as a politically defined and disloyal group was by no means universal during the early war years. The *Tribune* also printed an editorial criticizing the common position among German-American leaders that the U.S. should not export arms to Britain by calling it "a bit of good intention with unconsidered consequences" rather than attacking German-Americans.[25] In this way, they were willing to entertain disagreement with popular German-American views without imputing disloyal motives to the whole ethnic group.

The Lusitania: The Beginning of the End for Chicago's *Deutschtum*

The sinking of the Lusitania, however, resulted in a dramatic change in coverage. While the German press frantically published articles denying German wrongdoing in both German and English, the *Tribune* made itself a battleground. The newspaper published editorials that not only

[24] "In Darkest America," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL) Oct. 10th, 1914
[25] "The Best Editorial of the Day: Our Exportation of Arms," *Chicago Daily Tribune* Jan. 21st, 1915.

questioned German loyalty but the very idea of German culture or civilization. The *Tribune*'s view of the Lusitania incident itself is made clear by a short article from the day of the sinking about a German-American who rejoiced at the news. A "'neutral'" the article states sardonically, "torpedoed the German's jaw with his right." The *Tribune*'s editorial staff had little sympathy with anyone who did not mourn the sinking. But while that particular German may have earned scorn for celebrating a loss of civilian life, the paper soon began to publish articles attacking German identity more broadly. Two days after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, it published a translated article by a Belgian claiming that "there may be a German culture, but there is no German civilization."[26] Another article called German Kultur[27] "the enemy of culture," defining Kultur as utilitarian and materialistic. Although the author feigned objectivity, saying that being a materialist may be either worse or better than being a visionary, the article was in fact a full-throated attack on German and German-American identity. By denying that German-Americans' culture was really culture, he was attempting to delegitimize perhaps the chief unifying idea of the German-American community and one of the chief lenses through which they saw their engagement with the United States.

However, the *Tribune* also gave some space to suitably moderate German-Americans. Slightly less than two weeks after the sinking, the *Tribune* did print an editorial by a German-American on the sinking. The author of the editorial focused on the danger of letting Americans travel on a ship carrying munitions, such as the *Lusitania* and criticized efforts to drag American into the war "as a catspaw for the English mercenaries." Writing for an English-language newspaper, the author was careful to keep the focus on American lives rather than debating the

[26] Emile Verhaeren, "The Impertinence of Kultur," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 9th, 1915
[27] "Kultur" is German for culture. Since the article uses the word to contrast German "Kultur" with what the author considers real culture, I have left the distinction intact

righteousness of the attack, which might open him to charges of loyalty to Germany. Moreover, he concluded the editorial by recounting his immigrant father's service and death in the civil war, clearly feeling a need to assert he and his family's place in American history and give an example of immigrant loyalty.[28] His status as a true American was under rhetorical attack, and he needed to defend it as part of his political argument.

Chicago's German-American press, on the other hand, was focused on frantically arguing that Germany did no wrong in sinking the Lusitania. Throughout early May of 1915 a flurry of articles argued that Americans had been adequately warned of the war zone the German government had proclaimed, that Germany had the right to attack a ship flying the British flag and carrying munitions, that the *Lusitania* was a British auxiliary cruiser, and that American passengers had relinquished their neutral status by stepping aboard.[29] For some time the *ISZ* had been printing a few English language articles each edition, announced on the front page with the header "Be Fair! Read Our Articles Printed in American Language Daily on Page Four." In 1914 these English articles had been advertised as the "German View" of the war, but as the war progressed a more neutral title was needed.[30] These articles became entirely devoted to the *Lusitania*, with a mix of articles from earlier papers translated from the German and original English articles, sometimes from outside authors.

The *ISZ* also carried an advertisement for *The Fatherland*, a newspaper meant to bring the German perspective on the war to English-speaking Americans. The advertisement urged *ISZ* subscribers to "read it, let your children and especially your American friends and neighbors read it." Although it acknowledged that non-German-Americans were unlikely to read it of their own

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[28] E. Namsirp, "Voice of the People: From a German-American," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 19th, 1915
[29] See *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, May 8th, 1915 – May 15th,1915
[30] See *Illinois Staats-zeitung*, August 10th, 1914

accord, the advertisement and the very existence of the newspaper still urged for engagement between English- and German-speaking communities. Even as public opinion went even more against Germany and German-Americans became subject to increased suspicion and derision, they still held out the hope of shaping American politics.

Both the hope and vanity of being taken seriously in American politics as Americans were expressed in the physical space of Chicago when the Friends of Peace, a pro-neutrality organization with a large German-American contingent, held a national convention there. The convention was held September 5th, 6th, and 7th of 1915, only a few months after the sinking of the Lusitania and requested police protection. The organization's goal was promoting peace and keeping America out of the war. Since the United States was unlikely to enter the war on Germany's side, preventing intervention or support on behalf of the allies was an important goal for supporters of Germany as well as for simple pacifists.[31] The *Tribune* reported that even pro-German delegates had moved against a resolution to support banning American arms sales to allied powers, indicating both political sensitivity on the part of at least some German-Americans involved in the convention.[32] But an article the next day stated that the crowd had cheered upon hearing that a German submarine had torpedoed the passenger liner *Hesperian*, tarring the organization with a pro-German brush.[33] Moreover, almost all speakers were said to have attacked England.[34] Both the event and the organization were seen as pro-German.

The convention was in many ways a physical embodiment of the struggle of Chicago's German-language press, but played out in the physical space of the city. German-American

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[31] Tischauser, 18-21
[32] "Peace League Stops Talk on Arms Embargo," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 5th, 1914
[33] "Peace Friends Cheer Attack Upon Wilson," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 6th, 1914
[34] Townsend, 81-2

newspapers and activists were trying to convince other Americans that they ought to be neutral rather than supporting the allies and hoping for a German defeat. They mobilized extensively to do so, even bringing former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan to Chicago.[35] But the gulf of suspicion, mistrust and disagreement between German- and Anglo-Americans had grown too wide. Many of Chicago's German-American leaders still believed that they could promote a German-American identity that include strong ties to Germany and still be accepted as part of America. But, like the English-language articles published in the *ISZ*, even when talking in English, they still weren't speaking the same language. Nativists, nationalists, and supporters of the allies could not accept the idea of Americans supporting Germany.

Ultimately, examining the German and English-language press of Chicago in the early days of World War I reveals a community confident in its loyalty and ties to both German Europe and to America, and increasingly set upon by non-German-Americans who saw a contradiction in their dual identity. Hopes for German culture to take a prominent place in broader American culture were dashed as an ostensibly neutral America became increasingly intolerant of support for Germany, and even of German culture in general. The sinking of the *Lusitania* was a watershed, facilitating both an advance in anti-German sentiment and a desperate push by Chicago's German-language newspapers to push outside the ethnic community they were created to serve and affect politics more broadly. It is clear from the newspapers that one of America's largest German-American communities was undaunted by anti-German prejudice in their effort to celebrate a dual identity and win support for Germany. That effort, however was decidedly unsuccessful. The United States entered the war against

[35] Ibid.

Germany. And as for German culture, "there exists hardly a more apt description of the fate of 'Deutsche Kultur' in the United States than the word eradication."[36]

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[36] Kirschbaum, 15

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