Anti-german Sentiment Against German Immigrant

Throughout the course of history, immigrants of countless nationalities, cultures, and ethnicities have settled in the United States while greatly influencing the nation in its entirety. Most significantly, the mass arrival of Germans to the United States during the 20th century and even prior to the 1900s, has remarkably impacted American culture and life through the innumerable German contributions and achievements presented in American society, which are undeniably relevant to this day. German influence brought to America by immigrants played an instrumental role in the cultural development of the United States as it served as a pathway for German-Americans to spread additional traditions and teachings, most of which were passed down through generations. However, such prominent contributions were overlooked at the outbreak of the First World War, when discrimination toward German immigrants and German-Americans rapidly grew, subjecting individuals associated with German descent, culture, and even language to xenophobic hate crimes—making it not only highly difficult for German immigrants to assimilate into American society, but also consequently, excluding and stigmatizing them.

World War I—also referred to as the Great War—was a catastrophic turning point in American history. Fought in Europe between 1914-1919 by the Allied and Central Powers, the war is more commonly known as one fought against Germany as a common enemy. The Allied Powers—nations such as France, Russia, Britain, Italy, and the United States of America—fought the Central Powers — Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire—in one of the most brutal wars of history as it involved the use of new technologies including tanks, airplanes, submarines, machine guns, modern artillery, flamethrowers, and poison gas. This war was essentially sparked by the assassination of Austria-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand—heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire—during his visit to the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian-Serb member who desired the end to Austro-Hungarian rule. Archduke Ferdinand’s assassination triggered a chain of events in which Austria declared war on Serbia, while Russia prepared to defend its ally of Serbia. Eventually, Britain declared war on Germany, initiating the start of the first—and perhaps deadliest—war of the 20th century, resulting in a total of 40 million military and civilian casualties (History.com 2009).

While Europe was fighting at the start of World War I, America adopted the policy of neutrality, preferring to remain neutral in a matter that Americans believed was none of their business. President Woodrow Wilson’s favored policy of neutrality remained while only engaging in commerce and shipping with European countries on both sides of the conflict. However, on April 2, 1917, after a series of tragic events, President Wilson appeared before Congress declaring war against Germany. Hence, the United States joined the Allied Powers to fight in WWI under the command of Major General John J. Pershing. During U.S. involvement in the Great War, 4.7 million U.S soldiers fought in trenches, which were thought to minimize casualties from artillery bombardment and enemy raids. Eventually, the Central Powers lost and WWI ended November 11, 1918 —Armistice Day— when Germany signed a peace treaty declaring the official end of the war. However, peace was not quite apparent between Americans and Germans on American soil.

In 1910—before the formal commencement of World War I—about nine percent of the American population had been born in Germany or was of German parentage, and German was

considered the highest percentage of any ethnic group in America (German Historical Institute 70). Most German-Americans lived on the East Coast or in the Midwest; in fact, many of the early German settlers in America adopted farming or craftsmanship as a means of work, positioning them near countrymen in towns or the countryside. Many of these Germans emigrated to America for numerous reasons such as escaping economic hardship, political oppression, religious persecution, and severe unemployment caused by the political unrest present in Germany, which resulted in riots, rebellion, and eventually a revolution in 1848 (U.S.History.org). However, most German immigrants who arrived in the 1880s and thereafter moved to cities to find work (German Historical Institute, 70).

By the 1910 Census Survey, Germans became known as the largest non-English speaking minority group in the United States, as the United States Census Bureau recorded more than 8 million first and second-generation German-Americans in the American population of 92 million (German Historical Institute, 70). By 1914, the vast majority of German-Americans were born descendants of earlier German immigrants, resulting in sympathizing with their relatives in the old “Fatherland,” which was a nationalist term used in Nazi Germany to unite Germany in devotion to the culture and traditions of ancient customs. Despite many German-Americans’ devotion to their German origins, most identified firstly as Americans and thus shared the idea of neutrality with President Woodrow Wilson, desiring to stay out of the Great War (German Historical Institute, 70).

Soon after the commencement of World War I, two highly significant yet disastrous events inspired the eventual rise of prejudice and nativism against Germans both immigrants and German Americans. President Woodrow Wilson led America into WWI in 1917 and formally declared war against Germany because of Germany’s violation of its pledge to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare in waters surrounding Isles; in 1915, German U-boats sank liner known as the Lusitania, waging war against Britain and killing approximately 128 American civilians that were on board. Moreover, despite a neutrality agreement, German U-boats continued to attack merchant ships—sinking an Italian liner killing more than 270 people including 25 Americans (History.com, 2009). The German sinking of U.S. ships provoked America to engage in WWI, but the incident of the Zimmermann Telegram exacerbated a ticking time bomb. The Zimmermann Telegram was a secret message sent from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman to the Mexican government, inviting an alliance with Mexico, proposing to recover the southwestern states that the U.S. won during the Mexican War of 1846-47. The Zimmerman Telegram served as a way for the Germans to successfully persuade the U.S. into war while hoping speculations with Mexico would slow shipments of supplies to the Allies; this telegram played a significant role in turning public opinion against Germany in the U.S.

As a result of the Sinking of the Lusitania and the Zimmerman Telegram during World War I, hatred, and intolerance toward Germans in America increased abruptly, leading a pathway to anti-German sentiment and a rise in nativism — the favoring of native inhabitants as opposed to immigrants — against people of German culture, descent, and/or language. A great deal of native-born Americans viewed the Sinking of the Lusitania as an act of cold-blooded murder, later unethically identifying German-Americans and immigrants as “uncivilized brutes” and “huns”— a term used to describe Germans as menacing and ruthless — despite countless of German-Americans having held patriotic meetings in cities such as New York and Chicago to collect war relief funds. Consequently, German immigrants and Americans came under heightened observation since German origin made up approximately 9 percent of the American

population, and were essentially seen as a threat to society. (Robert 2017). Native-born Americans began to grow fearful and suspicious of German Americans and immigrants; fearing they would sympathize with Germany rather than the United States, disregarding the hundreds of German-American lives that were lost fighting in the Allied Powers against the nation of their origin: Germany (WWICenntenial.org).

Eventually, the scope of anti-German sentiment encompassed German-Americans who were now viewed as potential spies and saboteurs. Due to the fact that American-manufactured arms and munitions were being delivered mainly to Allied powers on account of their control of the sea, German agents tried to cut off supply lines by committing acts of sabotage in the United States—blowing up munitions shipments, and docks in 1916. The execution of these attacks had been planned, financed, and carried out by officials from the German Foreign Office, while others resulted from private initiatives. As a result of this clandestine activity, German-American loyalty was put into question during the 1916 presidential election campaign when candidates Woodrow Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes both declared “hyphenated Americans,” referring poorly to American people with ancestry to another part of the world as potentially disloyal. Shortly, President Theodore Roosevelt spoke out against German Americans with alleged divided loyalties, whose verbal attacks were often published in newspapers (“During WWI, U.S. Propaganda Erased German Culture”). Americans of German affiliation found themselves under a constant burden of proof regarding their stance on the Great War. Not long after declaring war, President Woodrow Wilson continued to speak disapprovingly of German-Americans in which his slander against them only encouraged the proliferation of — one of the most terrible ailments of all — racial indifference. Wilson proclaimed all German citizens as “alien enemies;” they were prohibited from living near military facilities or airports, in all port towns and in the nation’s capital, having to disclose their bank accounts and any other property to an Alien Property Custodian appointed by the attorney general. In 1918, German immigrants had to fill out registration oaths and be fingerprinted, and if they failed to comply with given rules, they were considered potentially dangerous and placed in internment camps such as Hot Springs in North Carolina and Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia, for the duration of the war. America is deemed a nation that practices liberty and justice for all, however, for citizens within to be treated with so much scorn and intolerance is quite antithetical and makes one wonder who the real enemy is.

Not only did Germans face political oppression, but anti-German propaganda failed to lessen the degree of racism inflicted upon German people in the United States. American newspapers and government officials worsened anti-German sentiment, feeding the public’s paranoia against German-Americans by spreading rumors that they were secretly hoarding weapons and that spies were poisoning food; in turn, Americans were warned to be watchful of their neighbors of German descent and to report any suspicious person to the authorities (German Historical Institute, 70). American patriotism and loyalty had to be proven by Germans by encouraging involvement in liberty loans, donations to the Red Cross, participation in parades, and enlistment in the armed forces, where any form of disagreement was considered pro-German and thus unpatriotic. Further anti-German propaganda was produced in America, liberally and unlawfully portraying anyone of German descent as “monsters” and barbarians of atrocities that were often imagined and invented out of hatred (10 Anti-German Propaganda Posters from WWI). As it was insensitive for Americans to attack German people in the United States who had no interest in supporting their ancestral nation—preferring to remain loyal toward their dwelling nation—it would be exceedingly insensitive to neglect the painful German-American experience amid racial oppression at the outbreak of World War I.

In the anti-German hysteria of World War I, Germans in America tolerated an overwhelming extent of indifference as a result of several events that triggered the rise of nativism and sentiment. Despite the assimilation of German immigrants into the English-speaking mainstream before the 20th century, many new German-immigrants experienced difficulty assimilating in American society as they sent their children to German-language public schools in cities such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago; these cities gave parents the option for their elementary school-aged children to receive their instruction in German. However, during World War I an argument arose: if an individual learned to speak the German language, they would be considered a “Hun”— a contemptuous term for anyone from Germany— and if an individual spoke German, they would eventually adopt the mentality of an extreme nationalist German and become a totalitarian in favor of the Kaiser—the German Emperor and King of Prussia, reigning from June 15, 1888, until his abdication on November 9, 1918, shortly before Germany’s defeat in WWI (History.com). Anti-German sentiment further extended to the imprisonment of Hans Kuhnwald, the concertmaster of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; following multiple unlawful establishments such as the German language becoming forbidden, the German-American press being heavily censored, the eradication of German books in libraries, and the targeting of German-American organizations, all which occurred while German-Americans simply considered themselves to be good Americans of German extraction; several generations removed from the old country (During WWI, U.S. Government Propaganda Erased German Culture).

These series of oppressive affairs rooted from unjustifiable racial ideologies, made it extremely burdensome for German-immigrants to feel ‘at home’ in the United States. In Davenport, Iowa, where the majority of Germans settled, German books were burned and in some places, German-Americans became victims of beatings. In response to the discrimination Germans faced during World War I, German immigrants made changes to themselves in which they no longer embraced their German culture and stopped celebrating German traditions. Not only did Germans face this oppression and suppression in America, but many businesses changed their names to more American sounding counterparts, as they believed the changes would prove their loyalty to America (German Immigrants during WWI). In fact, German-sounding cities were renamed: Berlin, Iowa became “Lincoln, Iowa,” Germantown, Nebraska became “Garland, Nebraska.” Changes as simple as the names of German foods were also refined: sauerkraut became known as “liberty cabbage,” hamburgers as “liberty patties” while sauerkraut consumption collapsed by 75 percent, during the period 1914-1918 (Ancenstry.com - German Americans During WWI). These changes served as a way for German-Americans to prove their sense of loyalty to America as it revolved around the idea that these changes would lessen the supposedly fueled political support and “extreme nationalism” German-Americans possessed. These events had long-lasting effects on German traditions throughout America in which many German customs were lost and eventually after the Armistice ended the Great War on November 11, 1918, with the Peace Treaty of Versailles— German Americans found themselves once again under the microscope at the later outbreak of World War II. (Ancestry.com - German Americans during WWI).

Ultimately, it is evident that at the outbreak of World War I, nativism and anti-German sentiment grew abruptly, causing an immense rise in racial indifference, marginalization, and degradation of the German people of the United States. It is important to acknowledge the lack of compassion and understanding that was shown unto German-Americans, by the American people, who had no part in the Central Powers of World War I, to prevent the repetition of such dehumanizing and narrow-minded occurrence in American history. This empathy is significant

because it would provide a greater understanding into the roots that have caused stereotypical views against ethnically German individuals to emerge in American society and that still linger today—although not as much compared to the duration of time during WWI. Such an awareness, in turn, plays a critical role in preventing the continuation of oppressive treatment toward people of other races and ethnicities. Despite prior research existing on this topic, further research must be conducted on behalf of the German immigrant experience to America during WWI because it would raise consciousness upon the German immigrant experience which is not often heard of and will also provide insight into how this oppressed group overcame exclusion and ultimately influenced American culture.