

The War and German Americans

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT



Figure 1. The U.S Government's propaganda posters portrayed Germans as brutes and barbarians.

Before the U.S. declared war on Germany in April 1917, many German-Americans — especially those that had been born in Germany — openly supported the Germans in the war against Britain, France, and Russia. Once the U.S. entered the war, though, the vast majority of German-Americans supported the American war effort.

Every war the U.S. has fought has been vocally opposed by a minority of Americans, and World War I was no different. But it was quickly assumed by many Americans that all German-Americans were loyal to the Kaiser. People with German-sounding last names were persecuted. German-owned businesses faced boycotts. In towns founded by German immigrants, German street names were changed. A Minnesota man was tarred and feathered when he was heard praying in German with a dying woman. At least one man was hanged merely because he was believed to be of German descent. High schools dropped German classes, and schools in majority-German areas were required to teach only in English. In Iowa, a 1918 law prohibited speaking any language other than English in public.

Woodrow Wilson's administration was directly responsible for this anti-German-American hysteria. The government's propaganda posters¹ portrayed Germans as brutes and barbarians ("the Hun"), encouraging Americans to *dehumanize* the enemy — to think of Germans as less than human.

In November 1917, former U.S. ambassador to Germany James W. Gerard made a speech in which he openly questioned the loyalty of German-Americans. Speaking to the Ladies Aid Society of St. Mary's Hospital in New York, he demanded the complete devotion of all Americans to the war effort and threatened to hang German-American spies from lamp-posts. Twenty years earlier, Gerard's speech would likely have been forgotten. But by 1917, the speech could be recorded, pressed onto records, and distributed. Gerard's references to lynching were heard across the country.

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Transcript

I know that it is hard for Americans to realize the magnitude of the war in which we are involved. We have problems in this war no other nations have. Fortunately, the great majority of American citizens of German descent have, in this great crisis of our history, shown themselves splendidly loyal to our flag.

Everyone had a right to sympathize with any warring nation. But now that we are in the war there are only two sides, and the time has come when every citizen must declare himself American — or traitor!

We must disappoint the Germans who have always believed that the German-Americans here would risk their property, their children's future, and their own neck, and take up arms for the Kaiser. The Foreign Minister of Germany once said to me "your country does not dare do anything against Germany, because we have in your country 500,000 German reservists who will rise in arms against your government if you dare to make a move against Germany."

Well, I told him that that might be so, but that we had 500,001 lamp posts in this country, and that that was where the reservists would be hanging the day after they tried to rise. And if there are any German-Americans here who are so ungrateful for all the benefits they have received that they are still for the Kaiser, there is only one thing to do with them. And that is to hog-tie them, give them back the wooden shoes and the rags they landed in, and ship them back to the Fatherland.

I have travelled this year over all the United States. Through the Alleghenies, the White Mountains, and the Catskills, the Rockies and the Bitterroot Mountains, the Cascades, the Coast Range, and the Sierras. And in all these mountains, there is no animal that bites and kicks and squeals and scratches, that would bite and squeal and scratch equal to a fat German-American, if you commenced to tie him up and told him that he was on his way back to the Kaiser.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4962>.

About the author

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