"A Menace to Peace and Progress"

Unexplored Newspaper Reports and Testimonials Pertaining to the Ban of the German Language in 1918

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In the midst of World War I, the German-speaking population of South Dakota endured a wide array of discriminatory restrictions, including extensive limitations imposed upon the teaching and public use of the German language. Darrell R. Sawyer and Donald Grebin produced valuable master's theses on these restrictions, yet the topic is far from exhausted.[1] Nearly fifty years after the publication of their studies, important sources Sawyer and Grebin did not investigate shed new light on anti-German policies. These materials include numerous reports printed in South Dakota's German newspapers of the time, data contained in the reports of the state's superintendent of public instruction, bulletins of the South Dakota Council of Defense, letters written by the state's German clergymen, and interviews located in the South Dakota Oral History Center. Given our state's rich German heritage, a study of the relevant reports composed in German is worth conducting and offers new perspectives on the subject, particularly the reactions that the measures evoked in the state's German press and among the general public.

The *Zeitgeist* of the early twentieth century was anything but favorable to the German American community. The Progressive Era's spirit of social cohesion, unity, and broad solidarity offered little support for particularistic interests, such as those of ethnic communities throughout the United States.[2] Similarly, the nineteenth century's prevailing *laissez-faire* approach toward immigration had assumed automatic as-

1. Darrell Richard Sawyer, "Anti-German Sentiment in South Dakota During World War I," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 38 (1977): 439–514; Donald W. Grebin, "The South Dakota Council of Defense, 1917–1919," (Master's Thesis, University of South Dakota, 1975). The author would like to express his appreciation of the useful suggestions received from the editors of *South Dakota History*, the anonymous external reviewer, as well as Professor Steven Bucklin at the University of South Dakota.

2. Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 174.

similation of the newcomers into the proverbial melting pot, but that assumption now gave way to politics of enforced and accelerated Americanization.[3] In this collectivist climate, the preservation, let alone the construction, of ethnic and linguistic autonomies became stigmatized as deviant and selfish individualism.[4] As Christopher J. Capozzola points out,"[t]hose Americans who were citizens by birth had rarely (if ever) been asked for explicit consent to the social contract that they had implicitly entered, yet the state nonetheless took their consent for granted. . . . The obligations of some Americans to multiple states or to multiple languages frustrated the defenders of national loyalty."[5]

The 2,501,333 Germans counted in the Census of 1910 represented the largest group within the foreign-born population of the United States. That figure was augmented by an additional 1,174,973 predominantly German-speaking foreign-born Austrians. Thus, Germans and Austrians together constituted 27.2 percent of the foreign-born population.[6] Along with the millions of Austrians and Germans of foreign parentage, i.e., second-generation immigrants, German-speaking Americans thus became primary targets of nativist collectivism. Even before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Germans had gradually lost their reputation for being hard-working and reliable citizens.[7] Their churches, with German as the language of worship, along with associations, clubs, and even local choral groups, evoked allegations of separatism. Moreover, Germans had been repeatedly stereotyped as individuals with a propensity for pacifism, political radicalism—including socialist views—and excessive alcohol consumption even on Sundays and holidays. In fact, the derogatory slur "Huns" in reference to Germans emerged as early as 1890.[8] As William Breen points out, highly efficient

3. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 63.

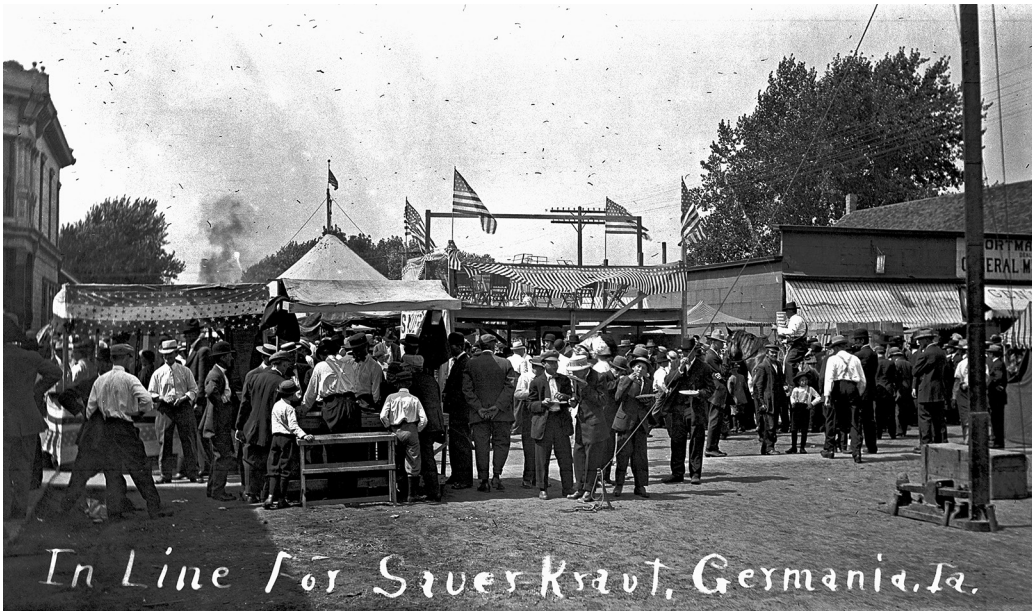
4. William J. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of Defense, 1917–1919* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 79–80.

5. Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, p. 175.

6. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1910), 1: 781.

7. Kennedy, *Over Here,* p. 68.

8. Paul Finkelman, "German Victims and American Oppressors: The Cultural Background and the Legacy of Meyer v. Nebraska," in *Law and the Great Plains: Essays on the Legal History of the Heartlands*, ed. John R. Wunder (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), p. 37.



Residents celebrate Sauerkraut Day in the streets of Germania, Iowa, ca. 1912. In October 1918, citizens voted to change the town's name to "Lakota," though the change did not become official until the following year.

anti-German British propaganda before and during the war caused additional damage to the German community.[9] American propaganda declared that Germans living in the United States were complicit in diplomatic transgressions by the German government, such as the infamous 1917 Zimmermann Telegram proposing a military alliance between Germany and Mexico; they were likewise blamed for blatant atrocities, such as those committed by German troops during the invasion of Belgium in 1914 and the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in 1915. Some German American intellectuals, disillusioned by Prussian authoritarianism and critical of the pacifistic stances of their compatriots, at times contributed to the development of anti-German sentiment in their public speeches and journalistic work.[10]

Following the outbreak of the war, German citizens residing in the United States were frequently accused of committing acts of sabotage

9. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home*, p. 80.
10. Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, p. 198.

and instigating labor strikes.[11] German immigrants also invited unwelcome attention from nativist circles by conducting charitable actions for the benefit of civilian populations in the Europe. Moreover, their continuous efforts to preserve their native language were repeatedly interpreted as evidence of separatism. The American Defense Society called for the elimination of "the Hun language" in all United States schools.[12] In this tense atmosphere, celebrities such as James R. Day, the Chancellor of Syracuse University, maintained that "it's religious to hate the Kaiser," and former president Theodore Roosevelt recommended that disloyal Germans be hanged or shot.[13] Atrocities committed against German Americans included various forms of public humiliation, ranging from whippings to tarring and feathering and even lynching, along with arson against German churches and burning of German books.[14] Further and longer lasting damage was inflicted by the limitations imposed on the German language in educational institutions, in public, and in religious services.[15] As Wallace Moore notes, school administrators all over the country refused to differentiate between contemporary German war propaganda and valuable German contributions to Western civilization throughout the centuries.[16]

By the summer of 1918, half the states of the Union limited or outright prohibited the use of the German language.[17] The restrictive measures were enacted by state councils of defense established throughout the nation during the war. Since in the Upper Midwest, the share of Germans of foreign birth or foreign parentage averaged 22 percent,

11. Kennedy, *Over Here,* p. 24.

12. Erik Kirschbaum, *Burning Beethoven: The Eradication of German Culture in the United States during World War I* (New York: Berlinica, 2015), p. 103.

13. Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You,* p. 182; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955), p. 209.

14. Niel M. Johnson, "The Missouri Synod Lutherans and the War Against the German Language, 1917–1923," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 138; Wilhelm Mueller, *Deutschamerikaner und der Krieg.* (Wiesbaden: Staadt, 1921), p. 45–46; Carl Frederick Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (1957; reprint. Ed., Whitefish, Mont. Literary Licensing, 2012), p. 269; Kirschbaum, *Burning Beethoven*, p. 15.

15. Frederick Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 216.

16. Wallace Moore, "German Language Instruction During the War," *The American-German Review* 5 (Spring 1939): 14–15.

17. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home,* p. 82.

defense councils in that region embraced the restrictions with particular fervor.[18]

According to the 1910 Census, in South Dakota 13,000 predominantly German-speaking Austrians, 83,000 Germans from Imperial Germany, as well as 33,000 Russian Germans (ethnic Germans who had settled in Russian territories since the 1760s) of foreign birth or foreign parentage constituted 22 percent of the total population of 583,888.[19] While the Russian German immigrants from the Black Sea area were significantly outnumbered by the newcomers from Imperial Germany and Austria, in some regions of the state they constituted a majority. The German newcomers from Bessarabia, the Crimea, and, above all, the province of Odessa, did not assimilate into the state's Imperial German population; rather, they maintained their diasporic identity for at least two generations in their own settlements in the northern and eastern

18. *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1910), 2: 615, 991; 3: 45, 343, 695.
19. Ibid., 3: 695.

"Here lies the remains of German in B.H.S." —the ashes of German high school textbooks burned in Baraboo, Wisconsin, as seen through the camera lens of E. B. Trimpey.

sections of the state.[20] In Yankton and Bon Homme counties, Russian Germans (predominantly Anabaptist groups of Hutterite or Mennonite confession) established their new homes, while in McPherson County colonists of Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic affiliation moved in to start their new homesteads.

With this total of nearly 130,000 German speakers, South Dakota faced the prospect of ethnic conflicts during the war. Yet compared with the excesses seen nationwide, including some Upper Midwestern neighbors, anti-German developments in South Dakota remained limited in their extent and impact.[21] For example, calls issued by the American Defense League for the elimination or banning of all German American newspapers did not reverberate at the state level.[22] Still, numerous incidents occurred in South Dakota involving beatings, tarring and feathering, and forced flag kissing in towns such as Dell Rapids, Junius, Onida, Spencer, and Wentworth.[23] Additional abuses explicitly targeting Germans in South Dakota included burning of German textbooks, smearing of pastors' homes with yellow paint, arrests of pastors accused of disloyalty, the jailing of Hutterite pacifists, and the detention and fining of socialist German farmers in Hutchinson County.[24]

20. *Dakota Freie Presse*, 8 July 1909, p. 12; Rex C. Myers, "An Immigrant Heritage: South Dakota's Foreign-Born in the Era of Assimilation," *South Dakota History* 19 (Summer 1989): 137; Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*. (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), p. 24; John Edward Pfeiffer, "The German-Russians and Their Immigration to South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 35 (1970): 303–319; George Rath, *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas* (Freeman: Pine Hill, 1977). p. 105; Anthony H. Richter, "A Heritage of Faith: Religion and the German Settlers of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 21 (Summer 1991): 155.

21. Nancy Derr, "Lowden: A Study of Intolerance in an Iowa Community During the Era of the First World War," *The Annals of Iowa* 50 no. 1 (Summer 1989): 5–22; Kurt E. Kinbacher, "Life in the Russian Bottoms: Community Building and Identity Transformation among Germans from Russia in Lincoln, Nebraska, 1876 to 1926," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 26 (Jan. 2007): 27–57; Charles Johanningsmeier, "World War I, Anti-German Hysteria, the 'Spanish' Flu, and *My Ántonia*, 1917–1919," (*Omaha: Digital Commons* 33–38, https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=englishfacpub, accessed 8 Nov. 2022.

22. Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America*, p. 174.

23. Sawyer, "Anti-German Sentiment," p. 471.

24. Robert F. Karolevitz, *Yankton: A Pioneer Past* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: North Plain Press, 1972), pp. 155–56; *Deutscher Herold*, 24 Jan. 1918; Duane C.S. Stoltzfus, *Pacifists in Chains: The Persecution of Hutterites during the Great War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

Such actions usually reflected the views of small but violent groups of troublemakers. As Myrtle Sweet Robinson of Scotland, South Dakota, remembered, German homes were painted yellow clandestinely at night "just by a few radicals" with no support of the peaceable local population.[25] Violent attacks against alleged pro-Germany sympathizers, however repulsive, never escalated to arson or manslaughter.[26] The German population of South Dakota were largely spared incidents of excessive brutality seen in other states, such as placing nooses around German residents' necks in Nebraska, public humiliation of German pastors and the defilement of German flags in Iowa, desecration of Mennonite churches in Illinois, and kidnapping and whipping of German farmers in Minnesota.[27]

Contrary to other states in the Midwest mentioned above, abusive actions were carried out primarily not because of xenophobic attitudes, but rather as retribution against individuals of German ancestry who were unable or unwilling to purchase Liberty Bonds (war bonds sold by the U.S. government to support the Allied war effort). After all, residents of rural areas in the Dakotas have been known as practical-minded people with little interest in hysterical or violent behavior. In any actions taken against citizens of German identity or ancestry, financial considerations took precedence over possible ethnic prejudices. As Herbert S. Schell notes, "Local defense councils . . . did not hesitate to use heavy pressure in the sale of war bonds and war thrift stamps," and the pressure was applied with particular zeal to citizens of foreign extraction.[28]

With no end in sight, the fighting in Europe escalated in the winter of 1917–1918. Meanwhile, in South Dakota German was increasingly stig-

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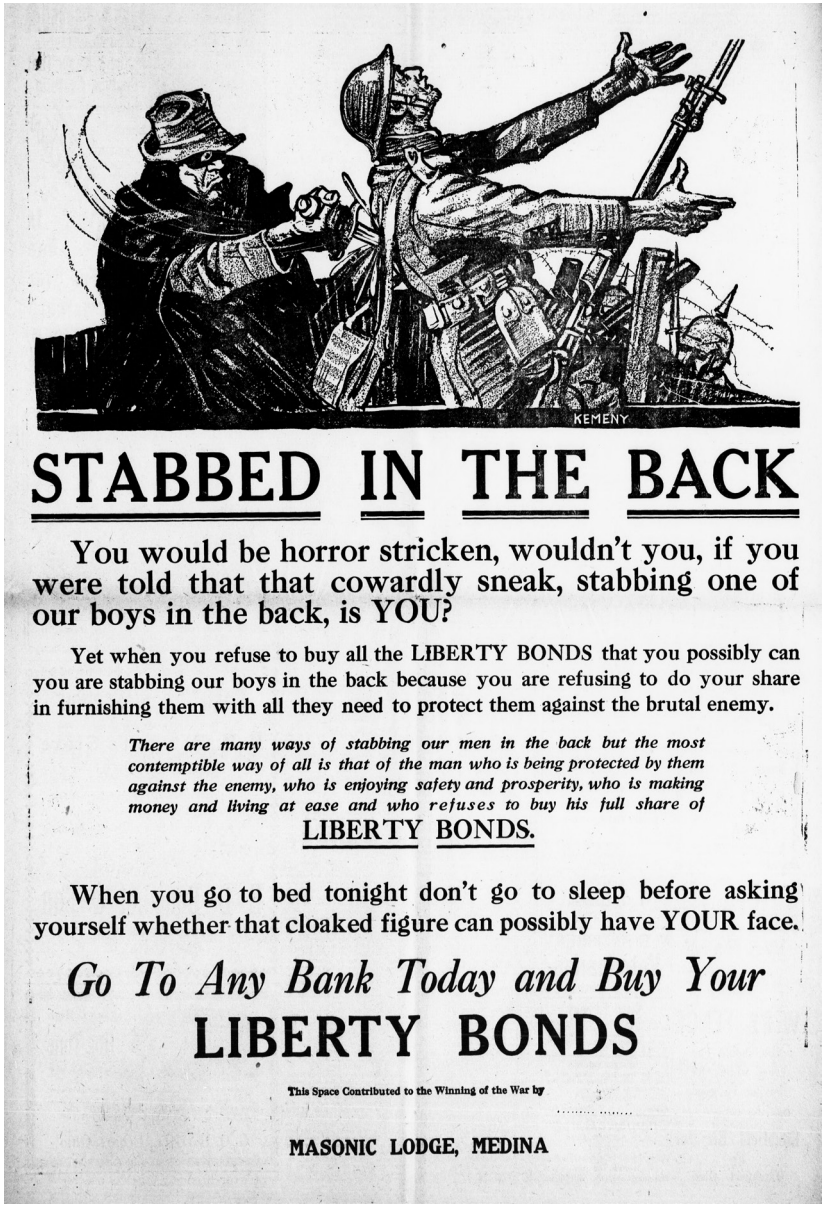
2013); Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed. (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2004), p. 273.

25. Stephen Ward, "Interview with Myrtle Sweet Robinson," 8 June 1974. Oral History Center, The University of South Dakota, Tape 680.

26. Sawyer, "Anti-German Sentiment," p. 460.

27. Kurt E. Kinbacher, "Life in the Russian Bottoms: Community Building and Identity Transformation among Germans from Russia in Lincoln, Nebraska, 1876 to 1926," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 26 (Jan. 2007): 42; Stephen J. Frese, "Divided by a Common Language: The Babel Proclamation and its Influence in Iowa History," *History Teacher* 39 (Nov. 2005): 59; Derr, "Lowden," p. 8; Mnopedia. https://www.mnopedia.org/anti-german-nativism-1917-1919, accessed 25 Apr. 2023; Finkelman, "German Victims and American Oppressors," 36.

28. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 271.



The 11 October 1918 edition of the *Medina Sentinel* featured this Liberty Bonds advertisement accusing those who refused to purchase bonds of stabbing U.S. troops in the back.

matized as the "Teutonic tongue," or the "language of the enemy." In April 1917, Governor Peter Norbeck appointed a Council of Defense in charge of coordinating the operations and resources in support of the war.[29] On 25 February 1918, the Council issued a resolution calling for discontinuing the teaching of German at all levels at all educational institutions in the state. But as Frederick Luebke and Donald Grebin note, the Council did not yet have statutory authority to pass legally binding decrees, so the memorandum sent to the school boards and superintendents, and the resolution itself, needed to be phrased in a non-binding style.[30] The Council thus resolved "that teaching the German Language . . . is detrimental to the best interests of the nation . . . and should be discontinued."[31]

The scope of this decree was modified at the Special Session of the Fifteenth Legislature. On 18 March 1918, Governor Norbeck declared that while he entertained no objections to foreign languages, he believed that "rapidly changed situations" and "strange and unfamiliar circumstances" warranted extraordinary action.[32] Norbeck's speech inspired members of the House and the Senate to adopt a joint resolution calling for restrictions on the instructional use of foreign languages.[33] A consensus emerged in House Bill 22, approved on 2 April 1918. Curiously enough, this new law no longer singled out German, nor any other languages, as had been the case in the Council of Defense resolution issued less than two months before.[34] Yet this modification turned out be short-lived. In House Bill No. 7, enacted in a Special Session, the state legislature bestowed full legal authority upon the Council of Defense.[35] Members of the Council used their new status to enact new,

29. Grebin, "The South Dakota Council of Defense," p. 5.

30. Luebke, *"Legal Restrictions on Foreign Languages in the United States, 1917–1923"* (Lincoln: Digital Commons//digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/196/, accessed 9 Nov. 2022); Grebin, "The South Dakota Council of Defense," p. 9.

31. *Report of the South Dakota State Council of Defense,* (Pierre: Council of Defense 1920), pp. 51–52.

32. *Journal of the House and Senate. Fifteenth Legislature, Special Session,* (Pierre: Legislature of South Dakota, 1918), p. 12.

33. Ibid., p. 20.

34. *The Laws Passed at the Special Session of the Fifteenth Legislature of the State of South Dakota,* (Pierre: Hipple 1919), pp. 47–48.

35. Grebin, "The South Dakota Council of Defense," p. 10.

more sweeping restrictions upon German. With the unsubstantiated justification that "the German language . . . has the tendency to and often does excite disturbance of the public space, and in some instances has produced violence," on 1 June 1918, the Council passed a new resolution.[36] According to this new order No. 4, no single academic subject could be taught in German. This time, the ban was extended to "all public and quasi-public meetings, including sermons or public worship."[37]

Governor Norbeck did not hesitate to sign the decree, even though in a speech given at a gathering of the Grand Army of the Republic one

36. *Report of the South Dakota State Council of Defense*, p. 71.
37. Ibid.

South Dakota governor Peter Norbeck, pictured here in a 1905 portrait by Harris & Ewing, Inc., warned against singling out German Americans but nevertheless approved banning the use of German in public places.

year earlier, he had assured his audience that no accusations of disloyalty must be made against German Americans based solely on their ethnic affiliation or attachment to their home country.[38] As Herbert S. Schell phrases it, "the Council's illiberal course of action involving freedom of speech and personal liberty tended to promote a spirit of intolerance which made a mockery of the very principles the nation was seeking to preserve."[39]

In this climate, school districts of South Dakota raised no objections to the restrictive Council orders and implemented them in an officious manner. In fact, as the weekly newspaper *Deutscher Herold* of Sioux Falls reported with grave concern, the school board of Sioux Falls had discontinued German in the entire district as early as January 1918, prior to the Council's actions.[40] The official *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of South Dakota* left no doubt about the full support that the state's educational administration lent to the Defense Council. Unscrupulously, the author of the *Report* of 1918–1920 stigmatized German immigrants and their descendants as individuals susceptible to hostile propaganda simply by virtue of birth without mentioning any specific wrongdoing on their part: "Unable to understand the language of their country, they are easily beguiled into acts that are unlawful and to give their moral and financial aid to all sorts of questionable schemes of agitators who can reach them in their own tongue. Thus they become . . . a menace to the peace and progress of the state and the nation."[41]

The restrictive measures affected nearly the entire student population of South Dakota. According to the Biennial report, in 1918, sixty-eight out of eighty-three accredited four-year high schools, with a total enrollment of 13,055, offered German in their curricula.[42] With the exception of sizable school districts such as Aberdeen, Lead, Mitchell, Rapid City, and Sioux Falls, with French, Norwegian, and Spanish

38. *Deutscher Herold*, 28 June 1917. The author translated all quotations from German newspapers in this study.

39. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 273.

40. *Deutscher Herold*, 17 Jan. 1918.

41. South Dakota. Department of Public Instruction. *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of South Dakota. July 1, 1918– June 30, 1920* (Madison: Daily Leader, 1920), p. 15.

42. Ibid., p. 249.

among their offerings, German was in fact the only modern language taught in secondary institutions of the state.[43] Thus, significant efforts became necessary to accommodate the students who needed the credits for graduation.[44]

In his thesis, Darrell Sawyer argues that the reaction to the language orders was "favorable for the most part."[45] But Sawyer's assessment, however accurate and well documented, is limited to sources written in English (including the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, the *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, the *Aberdeen News*, the *Mitchell Republican*, and the *Tripp Ledger*) and does not consider the ample press reports printed in German.

Leading German newspapers of South Dakota could not and did not turn a blind eye to the developments concerning their language. By early 1918, the state's four remaining German weeklies were all prepared in the East River region.[46] The German-reading market was dominated by three papers with locations in a geographic distribution: i.e., by the McPherson County *Eureka Rundschau* with approximately 5,000 subscribers, the Aberdeen-based *Dakota Freie Presse* boasting 12,000 subscribers, and the Sioux Falls-based *Deutscher Herold* with around 10,000 subscribers.[47] Each of these papers reached an audience not only in South Dakota, but also in Europe and South America—especially the *Dakota Freie Presse*, at times referred to as the "Bible of Russian-Germans."[48] Although the *Dakota Freie Presse* and the *Herold* were considered not only competitors, but bitter rivals, they showed no difference in their commitment to protecting their language.[49] Among these papers, the *Herold* made a particularly strong and courageous effort at advocating for the German language.

43. Ibid., pp. 62–75.

44. Ibid., p. 16.

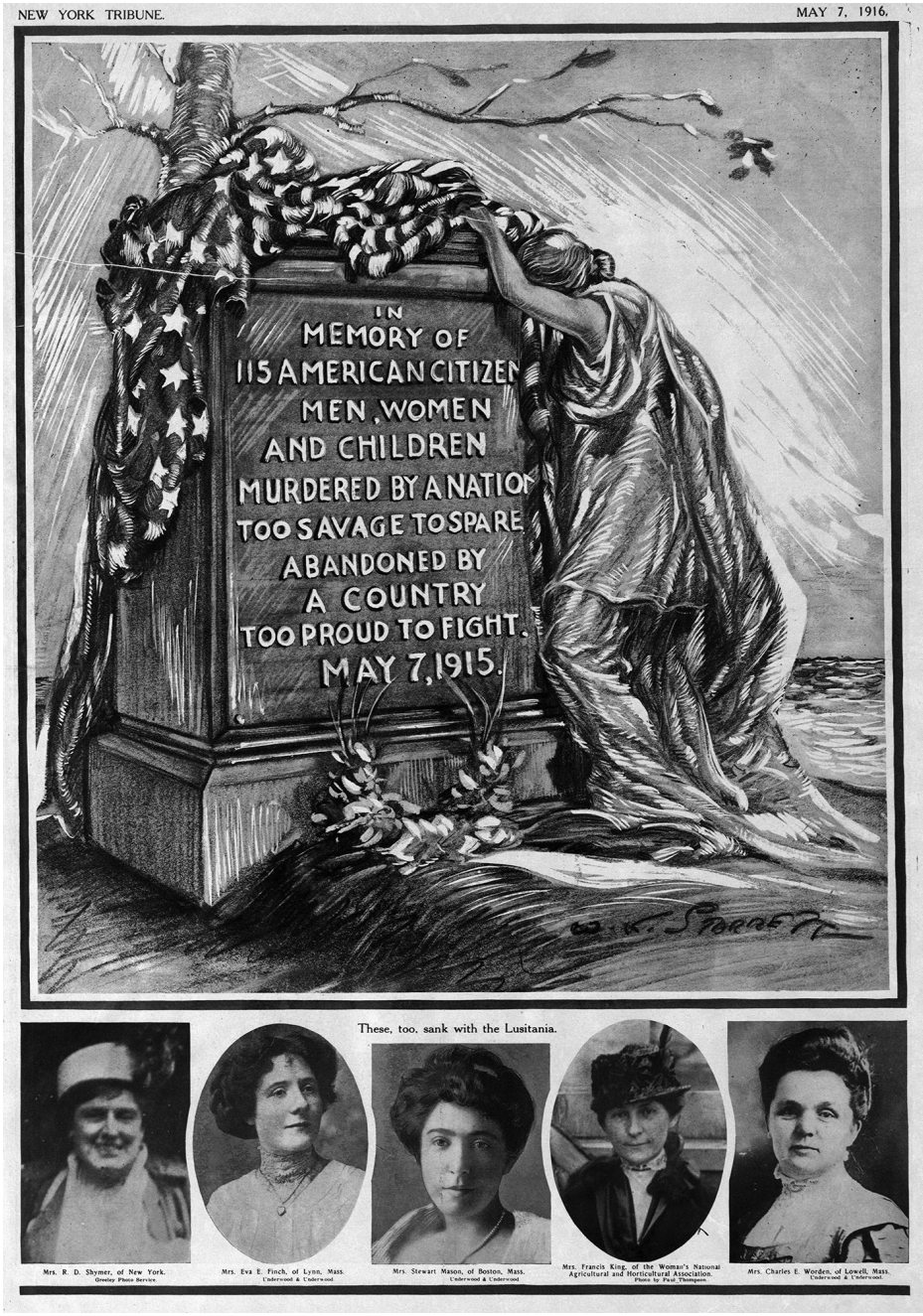
45. Sawyer, "Anti-German Sentiment," p. 484.

46. Karl Arndt and May E. Olson, *Deutsch-Amerikanische Zeitungen und Zeitschriften, 1732–1955* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer 1961), pp. 38–41.

47. Janice Hubert, Stangl and Thomas A. Stangl, comp., *Collectivization in the Soviet Union: German Letters to America 1927–1932* (Fargo: North Dakota State University Libraries, 2013), p. 1; Anthony Richter, "'Gebt ihr den Vorzug': The German-Language Press in North and South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 10 (Summer 1980): 197, 203.

48. La Vern J. Rippley, "F.W. Sallet and the Dakota Freie Presse," *North Dakota History* 59 (Fall 1992): 52.

49. Richter, "'Gebt ihr den Vorzug'" p. 200.



On the one-year anniversary of the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* by a German U-boat, the *New York Tribune* mourned American victims of the attack while criticizing the United States' neutrality in the war.

Editors of the state's German newspapers well understood that their survival hinged upon declarations of unconditional support for the American government at war. Thus, they made such assurances with particular eagerness. Bilingually issued "Oaths of Allegiance" attest to the balance that the papers struck between faithful attachment to the home country and American patriotism.[50] The *Herold*, for example, ran headlines such as "Americans to the Frontline!" and admonished Prussian militarism in the strongest possible terms by printing the manifesto issued by the American Friends of German Democracy: "We believe in agreement with President Wilson . . . that this war is a war for democracy . . . and a war against an autocracy that subjugates and seeks to enslave the entire world."[51] Similarly, the *Eureka Rundschau* repeatedly demonstrated its loyalty in declarations printed in English with the title "Where we Stand," along with German translations of the "Star Spangled Banner" in its entirety.[52]

At first, German newspapers of the state attempted to downplay the troubles that their language faced. When the school board of Sioux Falls voted to delete German from the district's high school curriculum, effective at the end of the 1917–1918 year, the *Herold* offered the illusory assurance that "the language itself will suffer no detriment" as a result of this decision.[53] Yet following the resolutions of the Defense Council and the state legislation of the Special Session in the spring of 1918, the local German press realized that it could no longer sustain its position of reticence. By reporting on restrictions imposed in other states, such as Ohio and Missouri, the editors were able to express their concern about their language without inviting unwelcome attention from local authorities.[54] When identifying the individuals responsible for creating a hostile environment, the German papers carefully avoided blaming the local or federal governments and instead pointed at unidentified "elements of poison" in society as the sources of hatred.[55] In September 1917, editor Conrad Kornmann at the *Herold* reminded his readers that the first German newspaper in the United States was founded in 1792,

50. *Dakota Freie Presse*, 14 May 1918.
51. *Deutscher Herold*, 4 Apr. 1918; 28 Mar. 1918.
52. *Eureka Rundschau*, 3 Apr. 1918; 25 Apr. 1917.
53. *Deutscher Herold*, 17 Jan. 1918.
54. Ibid., 7 Mar. 1918.
55. Ibid., 20 Sept. 1917.

not by a so-called "hyphenated foreigner," but by Benjamin Franklin, a "true-blue, noble, and far-sighted American."[56]

When advocating their language amidst the turbulence of the war years, editors of German weeklies consistently emphasized that banning the language was incompatible with the principles of American patriotism. As early as February 1918, the *Herold* passionately reminded its subscribers of the German contribution to American culture nationwide and also of the opposition that German clergymen had manifested against slavery "in the spirit of philanthropy and mercifulness." As the editor implied, restrictions upon a language and its speakers were clearly in violation of the American motto of *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one") and sent a discouraging message to members of the first and second generations willing to integrate into American society: "From every German family, sons march to combat duty. Fathers and mothers bequeath their farewell blessings in German – and the language, which did so many splendid and great things for our country, is now persecuted with hatred."[57]

As all German newspapers of the state agreed, in addition to alienating loyal citizens who spoke a "foreign tongue," suppressing languages would be economically detrimental in an increasingly globalized world following the end of the war. In substantiating this point, editors of German weeklies including the *Eureka Rundschau*, the *Dakota Freie Presse*, and the *Herold* unanimously referred to Philander Priestly Claxton, the United States Commissioner of Education and an ardent supporter of language study.[58] At the request of Robert Lincoln Slagle, President of the University of South Dakota between 1914 and 1929, Claxton authored a letter in support of German entitled "The Retention of Teaching of German in the Public Schools," first published in the journal *School and Society*.[59] The state's German weeklies decided to print

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 21 Feb. 1918.

58. *Eureka Rundschau*, 2 Apr. 1919; *Dakota Freie Presse*, 2 Apr. 1918; *Deutscher Herold*, 4 Apr. 1918.

59. Slagle to Claxton, 26 Feb. 1918, Correspondence, Nov. 1917–Apr. 1918, Box 10, Robert Lincoln Slagle Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University Libraries, University of South Dakota, Vermillion; Charles Lee Lewis, *Philander Pristley Claxton: Crusader for Public Education* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1948), p. 205; *School and Society*, 30 Mar. 1918, p. 374.

Commissioner of Education Philander Priestly Claxton penned an open letter supporting German language instruction in schools, which was reprinted in South Dakota's German newspapers. Claxton is seen here in a 1914 photograph by Harris & Ewing, Inc.

Claxton's open letter at full length in German translation. The editors of the *Eureka Rundschau* also published the letter in English. Claxton wrote, "After the war is over intercourse with the German people will be reestablished . . . Germany may even yet become one of the leading nations for the preservation of peace of the world. For practical and commercial purposes, we shall need a knowledge of the German language more than we have needed it in the past."[60] Although Claxton's hopes that Germany would participate in maintaining international peace after the war did not come to fruition, the argument that military adversity can be converted into economic cooperation undoubtedly deserves consideration.

Such pragmatic arguments based on common sense were supplemented by the tribute the newspapers paid to familial values and cultural diversity achieved through the mother tongue: preserving the native language is an effective tool for maintaining traditional familial bonds in the new world; stable families, in turn, provide a firm basis for social cohesion. Suppressing languages and their speakers, on the other hand, would not only exert a detrimental effect on ethnic minorities, but also on society in its entirety. In the expectation of the *Herold,* oppression would generate an increased fighting spirit on part of the state's German population:

> How short-sighted are those statesmen or politicians who seek to eradicate a language! And how little success they have had in the course of the centuries! And how closely various ethnic groups are able to live and work together within one political system, that has been manifested in the Swiss Republic for centuries. Today, some imprudent, inconsiderate, and disrespectful Americans — who, fortunately, only constitute a minority — attempt to eliminate the German language in this country. . . . It has been apparent in all countries in all times, that nothing will preserve the language of a minority stronger than gagging and oppression.[61]

German weeklies occasionally turned to creative literature to support their case. Retaining the ability to read German authors such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe mattered

60. *Eureka Rundschau*, 3 Apr. 1918.
61. *Deutscher Herold*, 11 Apr. 1918.

little to Americans caught up in wartime.[62] Recognizing this, the editors made a stronger argument by referring to American classics favorable to multilingualism, such as the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

> Agitators against the German language should take to heart the following lines of Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," in which an Indian visionary offers the following insight:
>
> > All the land was full of people
> > Restless, struggling, toiling, striving,
> > Speaking many tongues, yet feeling
> > But one heart-beat in their bosoms.[63]

Since the orders of the Council of Defense affected church services, the German press also commented on the measures concerning German-speaking Christians. In an unusually hyperbolic manner, Conrad Kornmann and his staff at the *Herold* described the relevant discriminatory measures in other states as acts of "unspeakable ferocity" with the "obliteration of the intellectual existence of hundreds of thousands of people" as the anticipated result.[64] In their report on a Lutheran service in Humboldt, South Dakota, required now to be given in English rather than German, the *Herold* did not recoil from using sarcasm: "We have been forced to set aside our German hymnals; from now on, singing, praying, and preaching will be done in American. . . . To our elderly, this will present the opportunity to practice the vernacular. Humans will turn old just like cows and remain lifetime learners."[65]

Without explicitly blaming the governor, the Defense Council, the state legislature, or any other authorities, the German weeklies cited above, with a total of 25,000 to 30,000 subscribing families, significantly contributed to maintaining an awareness of the state's rich multi-ethnic complexion.

62. *Eureka Rundschau*, 2 Apr. 1919.

63. *Deutscher Herold*, 28 Mar. 1918. The paper quotes Longfellow in German translation; the original version cited above is contained in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 269.

64. *Deutscher Herold*, 25 Apr. 1918.

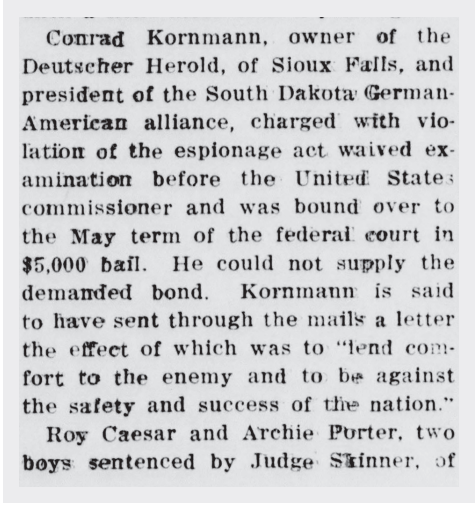
65. *Deutscher Herold*, 6 June 1918.

Sadly, the journalists' good deeds protecting their language did not go unpunished. Situated in a majority-German county, the owners of the *Eureka Rundschau* successfully escaped harassment by any nativists in the local population or by the authorities.[66] Yet as La Verne Rippley describes in his study on the subject, the management of the *Dakota Freie Presse* was less fortunate. The Prussian-born publisher of the paper, Friedrich Wilhelm Sallet (1859–1932), was indicted in January 1918 for his paper's failure to comply with the Espionage Act of 1917, which required that English translations of the news items printed in foreign language newspapers must be filed with the local post office.[67] J. F. Paul Gross, the editor directly responsible for providing the translations, was confined in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. With the help of Dorothea Rehfeld, South Dakota's first female lawyer, Sallet himself escaped imprisonment but was fined $500. His legal expenses forced him to sell the paper to a company in New Ulm, Minnesota. He spent the rest of his life organizing charitable functions for Germans who remained in the Soviet Union, before committing suicide in 1932.

Sallet's tribulations paled in comparison to the ordeal suffered by Conrad Kornmann (1870–1936), president of the state chapter of the

66. *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1910), 3:635.

67. *Dakota Freie Presse*, 29 Jan. 1918; LaVern Rippley, "F.W. Sallet and the Dakota Freie Presse," *North Dakota History* 59 (Fall 1992): 12;



Conrad Kornmann, owner of the Deutscher Herold, of Sioux Falls, and president of the South Dakota German-American alliance, charged with violation of the espionage act waived examination before the United States commissioner and was bound over to the May term of the federal court in $5,000 bail. He could not supply the demanded bond. Kornmann is said to have sent through the mails a letter the effect of which was to "lend comfort to the enemy and to be against the safety and success of the nation."

Roy Caesar and Archie Porter, two boys sentenced by Judge Skinner, of

On 31 January 1918, the *Brookings Register* ran this notice of Conrad Kornmann's failure to make bail. Kornmann, the owner and editor of the *Deutscher Herold*, had been arrested days earlier for allegedly violating the 1917 Espionage Act.

National German-American Alliance and editor of the *Deutscher Herold*. In these capacities, Kornmann came under the scrutiny of officials charged with enforcing the Espionage Act. In July 1917, just two weeks after the act was passed, Kornmann sent a private letter to his friend and competitor Friedrich Sallet, expressing his concerns about the economic implications of the war, along with reservations about the Liberty Bonds. His letter, intercepted and classified as "not mailable," was used by the authorities as evidence of disloyalty and insubordination.[68] Kornmann was further incriminated by personal possessions bearing Kaiser Wilhelm's portrait. In an April 1918 trial in Sioux Falls, Kornmann was found guilty of violating the Espionage Act and obstructing the U.S. war effort and sentenced to federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. After an appeal, he was immediately released on bond. In February 1919, the United States Supreme Court overturned the verdict, and Kornmann was subsequently acquitted of all charges. Nevertheless, his reputation was severely damaged during his legal battles and the *Herold* was discontinued. As Rippley puts it, "Kornmann's 1918 conviction, while not isolated, was the most severe brought against 'pro-Germans' in South Dakota during World War I."[69]

Clergymen and other officials at German congregations reacted to the restrictions imposed on sermons and public worship with understandable alarm.[70] They shared their concerns in numerous letters addressed to the state's Council of Defense, approximately fifteen of which have been preserved in the South Dakota State Archives. As the pastors predictably—in fact assiduously—reiterated in their petitions to Governor Norbeck (who also served as Chairman of the Council of Defense), members of their congregations wholeheartedly supported their state and federal governments during the ongoing military conflict and also participated in the Liberty Bonds campaign. Lutheran and Baptist pastors and ministers repeatedly emphasized that limiting or forbidding German in religious services would deprive elderly churchgoers of practicing their faith in public. The petitioners unanimously argued that excluding Christians without sufficient mastery of English

68. Rippley, "Conrad Kornmann, German-Language Editor: A Case Study of Anti-German Enthusiasm during World War I," *South Dakota History* 27 (Fall 1997): 115–117.

69. Ibid, p. 131.

70. *Dakota Freie Presse,* 4 June 1918.

Dept of History

LEADING GERMAN PAPER IN THE DAKOTAS
ADVERTISING RATES
30c per Inch Display Ads
25c per inch for Electros
10c per Line for Readers

Deutscher Herold

AN AMERICAN NEWSPAPER PRINTED IN THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

"The Firms that advertise extensively in German papers will get a large share of the German trade." —Printers Ink.

Jahrgang 28 — Sioux Falls, Süd-Dakota, den 11. April 1918 — Nummer 40

Es gilt der Freiheit!

Süd Dakota geehrt.

Die Kaiser-Schlacht

Neue Angriffe der Deutschen bei Armentieres. — Amerikanische Verstärkungen treffen ein. — Japaner und Briten in Wladiwostok. — Amerikanische Verluste.

True translation filed with the post-master at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on April the 11th, 1918, as required by the Act of Congress of October 6th, 1917.

Gewalt bis zum Aeußersten.

Präsident Wilsons Rede am Jahrestage der Kriegserklärung.

Liebe und Pflicht.

Von Anna Kirchhein, Chicago.

(Fortsetzung auf Seite 4.)

The 11 April 1918 edition of the *Deutscher Herold* highlighted German attacks in Armentieres and Japanese and British intervention in the Russian civil war. The newspaper also prominently featured Liberty Bonds ads.

would infringe upon inalienable religious rights protected in the U.S. Constitution. An undated letter from Bryant, South Dakota noted that the parish or congregation served much more than spiritual purposes, since churches also contributed to maintaining cohesion in society: "Through the church we are able to combat those influences which may be contrary to the best interest of the government, and to educate the people as to their duty to the government."[71]

Baptist Pastor Bernard Brandt of Avon, together with Lutheran Pastor J. Linnenbuerger of Tea, South Dakota, and the signees of a joint letter from Zion Church of Lowry, South Dakota and Glücksthal Church of Akaska, based their case for exemption on the fact that their fellow German immigrants had not had the opportunity or the need to learn English since entering the United States in as many as forty years previously.[72] On 7 June 1918, Reverend Karel Gross of Bon Homme County, who originally emigrated from Bohemia after the Habsburg authorities allegedly forbade him from using his native Czech, compared the Council of Defense's measures with the brutality of Prussian militarism.[73] Nearly desperate in tone, some of the requests for exemptions (including the one by Baptist Pastor Emanuel Bibelheimer of Unityville, McCook County, sent on 28 May 1918) cited church conventions planned in German with the schedules already printed in that language to make their case.[74] The Council had not denied exemptions for conferences planned prior to the announcement of the relevant orders. Spelling, vocabulary, and syntax errors in some of the letters, including one mailed by E. S. Peters from White, South Dakota, with phrasings such as "a desent Talk the german Langues" and "mor then Rite," attested to the challenges many German immigrants experienced with transitioning to the American *lingua franca*.[75] Ironically, Peters' nearly unintelligible petition was one of the few that the Governor's office chose to answer. The reply asserted the unproven justification that German posed a threat to public safety, with no specific incidents named: "The use of this language has caused irritations, and violence in some sections of

71. Box 3499A, H 74-185, Peter Norbeck Papers, Folder Council of Defense XYZ. South Dakota State Archives.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

the state. This is the reason the order was issued. . . . The Government is in trouble and we appreciate your support."[76]

While most petitioners aligned themselves with the German-speaking population of the state, others believed that the restrictive measures did not go far enough. In his fervent complaint submitted to the Defense Council, the chairman of the local Red Cross in Kaylor, Hutchinson County, demanded a complete ban of the German language. As the document shows, the author's own mastery of English (at least in written form) did not quite match his passionate advocacy for it to be the primary language in the United States: "I feel that the only way Americanism can be pressed forward, and it should be first, last, and always Is to put A Tongue Bar on the German Language. . . . This is America and if they want to live here let them learn the Amer [sic] language."[77]

In recognition of the concerns raised in the petitions, the Council of Defense eventually authorized the affected pastors to provide fifteen-minute summaries of their sermons in German after having delivered them in English.[78] Obviously, this gesture did not accommodate those clergymen without sufficient command of English. As the bulletin titled *South Dakota on Duty* issued by the Council acknowledges, "the right of petitioning could not be denied to these people . . . [and] many of the pastors . . . were 100 percent loyal in every way and . . . were complying faithfully and willingly with our orders."[79] Along with assiduously assuring the public that "no one has any ground for asserting that there has been a modification of our Council Orders bearing upon . . . the German language,"[80] on 16 June 1918, the Council passed an altered order under No. 13, from which the clause "including sermons or public worship" was tacitly removed, "the use of the German language in assemblages of three or more persons, upon any public street, in depots, upon trains . . . in public of business . . . or semi-public places . . . or over any telephone . . . is hereby prohibited.[81]

76. Ibid.

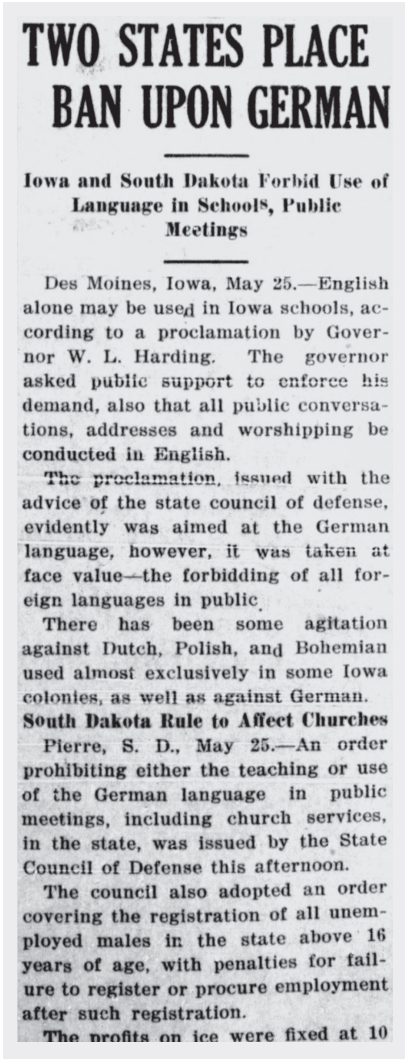
77. Ibid.

78. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 273; Box 3499B, H 82-058. Peter Norbeck Papers, Folder Council of Defense. South Dakota State Archives.

79. Box 3499B, H 82-058. Peter Norbeck Papers, Folder Council of Defense. South Dakota State Archives.

80. Ibid.

81. *Report of the South Dakota State Council of Defense*, p. 111.



TWO STATES PLACE BAN UPON GERMAN

Iowa and South Dakota Forbid Use of Language in Schools, Public Meetings

Des Moines, Iowa, May 25.—English alone may be used in Iowa schools, according to a proclamation by Governor W. L. Harding. The governor asked public support to enforce his demand, also that all public conversations, addresses and worshipping be conducted in English.

The proclamation, issued with the advice of the state council of defense, evidently was aimed at the German language, however, it was taken at face value—the forbidding of all foreign languages in public.

There has been some agitation against Dutch, Polish, and Bohemian used almost exclusively in some Iowa colonies, as well as against German.

South Dakota Rule to Affect Churches

Pierre, S. D., May 25.—An order prohibiting either the teaching or use of the German language in public meetings, including church services, in the state, was issued by the State Council of Defense this afternoon.

The council also adopted an order covering the registration of all unemployed males in the state above 16 years of age, with penalties for failure to register or procure employment after such registration.

The profits on ice were fixed at 10

The *Miller Press* ran this article on 30 May 1918, shortly after bans on the use of German in public—and even over the telephone—were passed in Iowa and South Dakota.

Curiously, this slight, yet significant change in the order's phrasing has not been noticed in previous research on the subject. Despite the reprieve implied in order No. 13, most of the affected congregations exercised the utmost caution and did not resume worshipping in German until early 1919. In what Niel M. Johnson described as a "curious, semi-legal episode," a Reformed pastor was summoned before the Council and fined ten dollars for preaching in German as late as Decem-

ber 1918.[82] As the *Lutheran Witness* noted, "every congregation will have to wisely and tactfully solve the language question according to local conditions and needs."[83]

Fortunately, retributions in response to violations of the linguistic restrictions never reached the harshness seen in the treatment of citizens unwilling to purchase Liberty Bonds within the state, let alone in the ample anti-German incidents nationwide. While Schell notes "a few arrests and fines" of persons in violation of the language orders, Darrell Sawyer names an incident in September 1918 in Gregory County with a group of individuals convicted of breaching the respective ordinances.[84] In addition, a hearing requested in Armour by a group of ministers regarding Order No. 4 of the South Dakota Council of Defense in June 1918 was disrupted by the commotion staged by local residents and called to a halt by local authorities.[85]

Interviews conducted by the South Dakota Oral History Center in the early 1970s unanimously cite the generally antagonistic atmosphere yet recall no atrocities or physical abuses prompted by use of German in public. As Ramona and Art Weishaar of Leola, McPherson County, note, anti-German sentiment was "very much" present in 1918 and 1919, as people were "not supposed to talk German, and it was very difficult for some of the older people that couldn't talk anything but German." Yet in the Weishaars' recollections, in McPherson County, where Germans constituted the majority of the population, citizens nevertheless continued using German not only in their homes, but also in their church services with no consequences.[86] In Nelly May Christensen's recollection, some citizens in Leola said "just things that they wouldn't need to say," but did "nothing violent" to German speakers of the area.[87] Similarly, in

82. Johnson, "The Missouri Synod Lutherans and the War Against the German Language, 1917–1923," p. 138.

83. *The Lutheran Witness*, 29 Apr. 1919.

84. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 273; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader*, 14 Sept. 1918. Quoted by Sawyer, "Anti-German Sentiment," p. 487.

85. Paul T. Dietz, "The Transition from German to English in the Missouri Synod from 1910 to 1947," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (149): 112.

86. *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1910), 3:685; Stephen Ward, "Interview with Ramona and Art Weishaar," 1974. Oral History Center, The University of South Dakota, Tape 1127.

87. Stephen Ward, "Interview with Nellie May Christensen," 17 July 1974. Oral History Center, The University of South Dakota, Tape 1112.

her interview Lena Wheat of Huron maintains that no "actual insults" took place in her area. She conveys the impression that sometimes the intimidated German citizens themselves practiced self-censorship in order to avoid conflicts with the authorities or the population at large: "Everybody seemed to conceal their origin. Anybody that was German, they wasn't [sic] free to talk about it. Seems like . . . there was a certain resentment, oh, not everybody but there was a certain class of people. They were nothing harsh but they just wasn't [sic] friendly with German people that really come from Germany."[88]

The anti-German atmosphere gradually diminished in late 1918 and 1919. In December 1918, the powers of the Council of Defense were returned to the state legislature, and with that, the Council's orders lost their validity.[89] By 1920, Freeman High School fully reinstated its German program and opened the way to readmitting the language into the curriculum at other public and private educational institutions of the state.[90] As the flagship institution of the state, the University of South Dakota reactivated German by 1920.[91] The annual Session Laws of the State of South Dakota contain no indication that the laws and regulations affecting the teaching and public use of German were ever officially repealed. In any event, after the United States Supreme Court declared the banning of German unconstitutional in 1923, all remaining efforts at imposing linguistic restrictions became null and void.[92]

The incidents involving Germans as convenient scapegoats provide striking and sobering examples of injustice committed in times of turmoil and uncertainty. Contrary to the prediction made by the *Herold* cited above, oppression failed to generate increased resilience on part of the German community of the state.[93] However, there is no evidence

88. Paul O'Rourke, "Interview with Lena Wheat," 1971. Oral History Center, The University of South Dakota, Transcript 213.

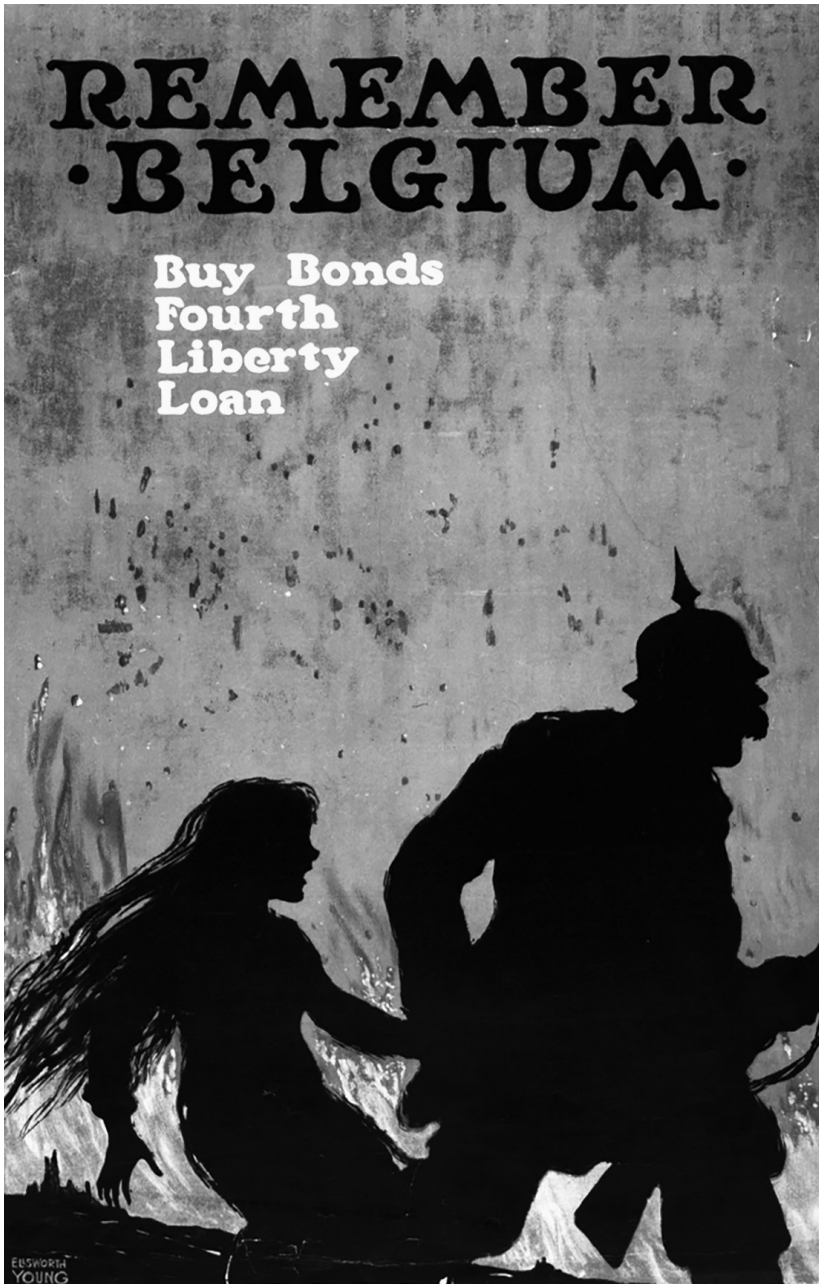
89. Grebin, "The South Dakota Council of Defense," p. 86.

90. South Dakota. Department of Public Instruction. *Sixteenth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of South Dakota. July 1, 1920–June 30, 1922* (Pierre: State Publishing Co.), p. 48. Unfortunately, the Superintendent's *Biennial Reports* no longer list the subjects, including languages, taught at the state's schools beyond 1922.

91. University of South Dakota, *Coyote* (Vermillion: Student Publications Board 1920), p. 51.

92. "Meyer vs. Nebraska (1923)." https://mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/786/meyer-v-nebraska, accessed 10 Nov. 2022.

93. *Deutscher Herold*, 11 Apr. 1918.



Federal propaganda contributed to anti-German sentiment in the United States. In this 1918 poster by Ellsworth Young, the flames of a burning town silhouette a German soldier and his Belgian victim.

that the temporary oppressive measures accelerated the assimilation of South Dakota's German community in either the short or long runs. During the war, large-scale immigration from Germany and Russia discontinued anyway, which resulted in the slow but inexorable assimilation of Germans.

Though the *Herold* of Sioux Falls ceased its operations in 1918, the *Eureka Rundschau* survived until 1927. Following a relocation to New Ulm, Minnesota, in 1920, the *Dakota Freie Presse* continued operations until 1954.[94] According to the Language Map of the Modern Languages Association, German remains a "predominant language spoken excluding English and Spanish" in many South Dakota counties, including Bon Homme, Clark, Codington, Deuel, Hutchinson, Kingsbury, McPherson, Spink, Turner, and Yankton counties. As of 2010, the same source indicates some 10,000 speakers of German residing in the state.[95] Additionally, approximately 8,000 Hutterites speak an archaic Tyrolean German dialect, infiltrated with plentiful English loan words.[96] The discrimination that German Americans experienced during World War I attests to the damage that bureaucratic zeal paired with temporary malignancy harbored in some segments of the population can inflict, even in states known for their hospitability and open-mindedness, such as South Dakota.

94. Ripley, "*F.W. Sallet and the Dakota Freie Presse*," pp. 15–20.

95. https://www.mla.org/Resources/Guidelines-and-Data/MLA-Language-Map, accessed 10 Nov. 2022.

96. https://www.aberdeennews.com/story/opinion/columns/2019/11/18/lawrence-south-dakotas-hutterite-martyrs/44294059/, accessed 10 Nov. 2022.

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On the cover: In 1919, citizens of Deadwood, South Dakota, paraded this effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, hanged it in front of the First National Bank on Main Street, and later shot it to pieces with shotguns.