The Cincinnati Germans, 1870-1920; Disintegration of an Immigrant Community*

by

G. A. Dobbert

At the turn of the century there was still a distinct German community in Cincinnati, known as Over-the-Rhine. A newcomer could conveniently depend on its institutions to meet most if not all of his social and economic needs. There was no urgent need for him to assimilate to the total community, though sooner or later he had to face up to this question.

Cincinnati's German institutions seldom outlived the generation which founded them, except for its churches, which often multiplied by fission. A significant number of these were established during the first wave of the new German immigration, 1830-49. The elite of this wave were the younger educated elements, dissatisfied with political and intellectual conditions in Germany. Though many societies sprang up in this period, as a whole the interests and backgrounds of this wave were far too disparate to encourage organizational longevity. Moreover, the Germans of this period seemed to assimilate rather easily.

The second wave, however, was spearheaded by the famous Forty-Eighters. Probably their most outstanding contribution was the Turnverein, to become the sociopolitical hub of the later German community. Of the institutions originating in the period 1849-65, however, only a few still extant in 1915 could be connected directly with the Forty-Eight movement.

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The community of the early twentieth century was largely the work of the third and last wave (1865–1914), the most substantial in numbers and continuity. Still, the city itself was growing faster than its German community. And these Germans differed from their predecessors in that they were expendable to their fatherland, more restless, more critical and demanding of their new situation. Many of the already-existing Cincinnati German institutions were altered accordingly to meet their needs and outlook, while many more were founded. Most immigrants of this wave were skilled or semi-skilled workers, and in some trades the Germans were predominant. In a single generation a significant number moved up into proprietorships and managerial positions, a trend accentuated in the second generation. The societies of the period proliferated, very often reflecting the occupations of their members. The trend to the suburbs and transportation difficulties contributed to the establishment of new societies perhaps as much as population increase.

By 1900, however, Germandom’s cohesiveness was affected by their geographical dispersion. While Over the Rhine had lost much of its political and economic significance, it gained new importance as a kind of spiritual core; and as suburban transit improved in the first decade, newer societies chose again to meet there.

More threatening to the community’s vested interests than the suburban trend was the community’s erosion by the rapid assimilation of its second generation. It appeared that only by a continuous transfusion of new immigrants could the community continue to exist as such. Its continuity, however, was affected by the fact that Germany itself was changing so rapidly that each generation of immigrants were virtually strangers to each other. Moreover, immigration was diminishing, and some other means to shore up the community against erosion had to be sought. These were to be the federations Taggesellschaft and Stadtverband. In turn, these organizations were eventually pressed into bolstering Cincinnati Germandom’s sagging strength with the rising prestige of Imperial Germany, which was to involve their followers in a most unfortunate conflict in their loyalties to the old and new fatherlands.

The word “Deutschthum” was dear to the hearts of all German-Americans, indefinable and untranslatable as it was. It meant the subjective total of whatever it meant to be a German, and the German language itself came to be its most outward and visible sign to all Germans. The preservation of the language became the first and last defense of the essence of Germanness — one of the few things upon which all Germans could nominally agree. Hence the continuing strenuous efforts of some to establish and maintain the teaching of
A GERMAN LUNCHEON CLUB IN DAYS OF YORE
(Hengstenberg Club)
German in the public schools. Still, many an immigrant neglected his mother tongue in favor of English, and the second generation scarcely used it at all. This paradox was due to the inherent problems of the language itself, for colloquial German in its several dialects had little relationship to the literary German employed by the intelligentsia. It was far easier for immigrants from Bavaria and Prussia, for example, tossed into the common pot of Cincinnati, to speak with each other in the bad English they had acquired on the job than to essay a conversation in High German, which was touted to be consubstantial with all German culture itself. Too, if immigrants were to better their social station, adoption of English was clearly imperative. As an antidote it was even suggested that efforts be made to convert the Anglo-Saxon elite to use of German instead of French as a second language. This was most unlikely, as the image of German perceived by the Americans was not that of the bearer of culture but the bearer of the beer stein. And with the renewed temperance agitation of the 1890's which matured into the Prohibition movement after the turn of the century, the defense of their "personal liberty" was to unite Germans far more effectively than the language issue had ever done.

Owing to the important brewing and distilling interests in Cincinnati, the Germans were assured of assistance from both major political parties. Therefore a considerable number of Germans belonged to both parties, each group, however, feeling that its own party was the one to do the most for them. To divisions of regionalism and politics must be added those of religion. Finally, there are those of class conflict. Somewhat in the fringe areas, however, there should be added the Methodists, who were alike to the Socialists in that neither believed that the preservation of the German language and of beer was the highest endeavor for Germans.

These infinite divisions among the Germans were resented as a sign of weakness by some of its leaders, and they endeavored to formulate some kind of philosophy or Weltanschauung in which all Germans could be united. The basis for this Weltanschauung was to be sought in the contributions which Germans collectively had made to American civilization. Up to the mid-1890's this was generally thought of to be complementary to that of the Anglo-Americans. But by 1895 the emphasis was shifting to an increasingly blatant nationalism; they had to overwhelm their fellow-Americans into the admission that the blessings of German immigration had done by far the most to create this nation — with due awe and respect to be accorded. After the turn of the century this growing emphasis
by the leadership made it appear as if, were a choice to be made, it were more important to be a German than an American.

The causes were multiple for this change in attitude among the more articulate German-Americans. The reliable old Forty-Eight leadership was dying out. After 1900 immigration was dwindling, and now consisted primarily of urbanized workers who had fewer stabilizing ties than their predecessors and were susceptible to un-critical acceptance of apparently well-established leadership. Too, Jingoism had become a world-wide phenomenon. Finally, encroaching Prohibition was creating a sense of threat on all sides. To survive was to strike first. Thus German-Americans began to organize into a united front against real or imaginary attackers, and their claims of strength give little credit to their sense of reality.

Chiefly responsible for the manner in which the self-perception of Germandom's rank and file became increasingly distorted were the Taggesellschaft and the Stadtverband. Anxious to please as many as possible of their diverse member organizations, their techniques were limited to emotional appeal. Thus beer and language became the concrete symbols of this lowest common denominator. These federations felt their mission to lead Germandom to ever-greater heights of recognition to be of such importance that they were entitled to appropriate cultural functions hitherto performed adequately by certain other societies of much longer standing, which already had lost much of their vitality. The Taggesellschaft and the Stadtverband in a sense answered a real need in the community, as they fulfilled basically two functions: they brought members dispersed all over the city physically together on the occasions of their mass meetings and protests; and they furnished the community with a spiritual identity, an ideology constructed primarily around Motherland, Mother Tongue, and Beer. Quite a few professional German-Americans thus recognized in Prohibition a deadly threat.

The new federations had the old traditional community dissensions to contend with. Ten years after the Taggesellschaft had been founded, the Stadtverband as a rival organization was born of such a conflict. In 1905 the Democrats had made a state-wide comeback with temperance support. Subsequent state legislation put German society life in jeopardy, for with blue laws they were gravely hampered in their development. Considerable anger and disappointment was expressed toward the Taggesellschaft when it appeared to squirm out of its expected duty to take political action when the first of its member societies felt the sting of the new legislation. After considerable manipulation, one of its leaders appears to have seized the open-
ing to establish a Cincinnati chapter of the National Alliance — the Stadtverband — which again rent the loyalties of the community. The degree and manner in which the new organization might be

politically effective was a question of hot debate. Eventually relations improved somewhat between the two organizations in the few years before World War I. But as they did, the prestige and strength of the Taggesellschaft dwindled, and by 1914 leadership had definitely passed over to the Stadtverband.

Still, the ultimate ingredient had not yet been found to unite all Cincinnati’s Germans in a common purpose, and perhaps could not have been if drawn solely from the American environment. The community’s leadership was increasingly driven to seek that ingredient from the old fatherland. Even in the 1870’s there was some borrowing of prestige and a sense of potential power from the victories of the Franco-Prussian War and the rise of a unified Germany. Yet, for a while in Cincinnati, this kind of German nativism was tempered by some leaders with a more objective and critical view of what was transpiring in the homeland. But by the turn of the century, criticism of Germany was considerably toned down. This could
be seen most significantly in the diminution of importance accorded the celebration of the 1848 Revolution, and the gradual resurgence of interest and sympathy with the new regime in the homeland. Even more, it came to be felt that the goal to be striven for was an alliance between the world's two greatest powers — America and Germany — to vanquish the hereditary foes, England and France. There could be no possibility of letting any rift come between their old and new fatherlands, and the German-American was to be the prophet of all German culture, science and morals. Indeed, Germany came to be for them what Athens had been to Pericles: the school of the world. Statements grew from exaggeration to hyperbole, and after 1900 it is difficult to assess to what degree the leadership was aware of it, or at what point sincerity yielded to hypocrisy. Nevertheless the effect was cumulative, and after 1910 Germany was the primary symbol with which the scattered flocks were rallied.

Then the war broke out, playing into the hands of the German-American leadership. Germandom was joining hands against its oppressors on both sides of the seas: American Prohibition here, and Anglo-French imperialism abroad. Many packed their kit bags and waited to be called to the defense of the old fatherland. Others mounted vociferous watch over Cincinnati's Rhine. There was a tremendous upsurge of common feeling for the homeland, unifying German-Americans as never before. Cincinnati Germans could aid in Germany's victory by gifts of self-sacrifice: "Gold gave I for Iron." To help war victims might even re-involve and re-germanize the too-well assimilated German. The sense of being drawn together in Germany's heroic efforts revitalized many of the old regular mass events, and the war provided many new opportunities for all-German manifestations.

Cincinnati Germans were never in doubt that Germany led a war for humanity, and any neutralistic action of the Administration appearing the slightest adverse to Germany was incomprehensible, even a direct blow against themselves. The German-American press carried the most tasteless attacks against the government for alleged offenses against them. It conveyed the feeling that Germandom everywhere was surrounded by enemies, and it argued further that Germandom could anticipate no respect from Americans unless it was forced from them. This could be done only by uniting to cultivate the finest flowers of Germandom: societies, churches, theater, press, and throughout, its language. And if bravely done, in combination with a German victory in Europe, the cloud of tribulation would eventually roll away to reveal a new renaissance of Germandom in this country as never seen before.
Throughout most of 1915 Cincinnati Germans made ready to greet their renaissance with boundless confidence as to the war’s outcome, yet the year failed to give them their rightful triumph. By mid-1916 they were puzzled and disturbed. Still, victory must be ahead. By year’s end they envisioned instead of triumph a peace symbolized by the nostalgic homecoming of the victorious but weary German warrior.

Yet this was about as much as Cincinnati Germandom’s official outlook seemed to be affected in those two momentous years. With an unchanging formula the most diverse developments were interpreted, rendering them sometimes almost unrecognizable. Basic to the formula were the dual tenets that Germany’s victory could be only to the benefit of the United States, and that of England, to its detriment. It was only on the issue of “Preparedness” that the official position ever was radically altered — but still according to format. When by 1916 they belatedly perceived that “Preparedness” might be intended against the old fatherland, they hastily withdrew their support. And step by step their view of the President evolved: from Wilson the inept and innocent, to Wilson the weak and corrupt, pawn of Wall Street. Thus, in the elections of 1916, they staked not only their honor but their survival on assuring his defeat. When he won, their shock was inarticulate and the meaning of their failure inexplicable. Still, they picked up their vituperations with scarcely a pause, and so immutable was their ideological position that they were apparently blind to the implications of new and serious events. They continued to trumpet the justice of their cause, while occasionally trying to explain away why they happened to be victims of public opinion. Their rationalizations were but a reprise of pre-war answers — the ignorance and backwardness of native Americans, their resentment or envy of honest German superiority. Perhaps a bit more: the plight of all Germans was heaven-sent chastisement for their earlier failure to cleave together and fight for liberty. But this might even now be rectified by financial investment in German bonds, by petitions and public demonstrations. This course of action more and more isolated them intellectually from the rapid stream of happenings and public opinion, but they had no choice; any other course would have been to deny the fatherland and to relinquish the real gains in unity achieved in the past two years, exposing them all to new disintegration. The winter and spring of 1916 was the zenith of German solidarity in Cincinnati and seemed to crown the life-time efforts of the community’s professional leadership.

In February 1917, fright and confusion among Cincinnati’s Germandom followed the rupture of diplomatic relations with Germany.
Their position had to be altered, but little was done, and that too late. Desperately they grasped at any straw which offered an omen of continuing peace in this country. But stupid and unjust as the threatened war against Germany might be, they had somehow to bear it and suffer without complaint. And eventually they began to fear for the personal safety of their own members. The reactions of the societies were neither so extreme nor so contradictory as those of the press, which had for so long worked to undermine their readers’ confidence in the American government.

Prewar organized Germandom by no means had included the city’s entire German stock. As a rule, organized Germandom was made up to a large extent of the first generation, and contained mostly the lower echelons of the white-collar class and the higher echelons of the blue-collar class. They were generally comfortably well off, but in spite of their material achievement they somehow failed to gain the recognition which they felt ought to be due them in view of their material standing. Furthermore, Germans belonging to organizations as a rule accumulated memberships; hence the figures as to memberships must be taken with a grain of salt. Finally, at least two federations (the Stadtverband and the Catholic Centralverein) were striving to represent the city’s organized Germandom, but even they were unable to attract all German societies and organizations. The war at least had the effect of bringing about some unity of purpose, which was even to attract eventually the German elite, which heretofore had stood aloof from most organized activities. As the war in Europe continued, increasingly the professional and better-situated classes became involved in war aid efforts, and among the upper classes even the ladies showed considerable initiative. The yield was far greater than organized Germandom alone could ever have done. Initially, the Stadtverband had organized a special war aid society which was to attract those elements which generally stayed aloof from the Stadtverband and its aims. Yet the Stadtverband saw to it that it controlled the society by a statute which made it mandatory that all the funds collected by the society were to be handed over to the German American National Alliance for further transmittal to the authorities in Germany. But it was not long before this new and prestigious aid society shucked off the Stadtverband’s control over distribution of these funds, and it was the “Aid to East Prussia” movement which marked the point of increasing domination by the elite in aid efforts. The Stadtverband had indeed effected at least a partial re-integration of the elite into the community, but not on its own nativistic terms.

Aside from the aid effort, the effect of the war in Europe on the German community as a whole is rather confusing. In some cases it
revived nearly extinct societies and stimulated the founding of new ones; in other cases it contributed its share to accelerating the decay of many a venerated German institution, and made life most difficult for others. The higher cost of living affected newspapers and charitable institutions, and finished off the theater. Nor did it nullify the truism that a society had to assimilate or accept decay, and the use of English continued to spread. Finally, old controversies, class antagonisms, and political divisions could never be entirely silenced. "Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose."

The United States' entry into the war found the Cincinnati Germans completely unprepared. In making their adjustment it was the societies and not the press which proved to be the more flexible. At first they clung to the hope that the war might quickly end in Germany's favor before the United States would have been able to participate in it with all its might. In a few months they justified their sufferings and their participation on the American side by the argument that the war was a teacher for all peoples. Moral lessons were to be learned from it, and the German virtues of order and thrift thereby would be incorporated eventually into the political and economic life of the United States. At the same time they became angry at the Kaiser for not leading Germany out of the war. As the wave of growing anti-German agitation began to crest, they reversed their attitude. If once they had emphasized what the Americans owed the German immigrants, they now underlined how much German immigrants owed America. This radical reversal of attitudes by 1918 also brought them toward taking a new look at themselves, and for the first time in fifteen years the press was again quite candid and self-critical. But it was too late to salvage much of German culture in Cincinnati or to preserve those institutions most dear to them — "Personal Liberty," and German language instruction in the public schools. And the press itself paradoxically had to thank the federal government and not its editorial perspicacity for its survival.

If the German-language press had abysmally failed to guide the community through its troubled times, some of the organizations, at least, were able to leap into the breach. Quite a number of societies and organizations managed to survive. Actually, the latter half of 1917 was a kind of Indian Summer for organized Germandom; but the peak of anti-German hysteria in 1918–19, combined with the Spanish influenza, was to finish off forever some of the weaker societies.

The Stadtverband put itself step-by-step on the side of the United States in the prosecution of the war, and it survived rather well the first onslaught of Germanophobia in the Fall of 1917. In time it
became politic to sever its connection with the German American National Alliance, then under Congressional investigation for treason. It had already modified its constitution to minimize its unpalatability to American nativists, and thus emerged almost unscathed as the American Citizens' League.

Some other organizations achieved their survival through name changes, too, but more important, through a more positive public commitment to all things American, including involvement in helping the American war effort on a local level.

The Cincinnati German community's involvement in the war eventually had to affect Cincinnati as a whole. At the beginning of the war in Europe, its English-language press had been bemused but sympathetic toward the reaction of its foreign-born. Even the Lusitania disaster did not much change their mildly benevolent and hands-off attitude. Still, this event had a subtle effect on the city's public opinion, strengthening the hand of Allied sympathizers and provoking signs of an incipient nativism, though the city's papers continued to try to minimize it. Unfortunately, the German-language press did not display the best of tact or common sense in its own interest.

The gulf widened, however, and became conspicuously noticeable in the presidential campaign of 1916. By Fall of 1917 public reason had begun to abdicate to the absurd in anti-German suspicions, though the press still tried to retain some balance in its position. By year's end, hysteria was mounting, and attacks were launched on all visible aspects of German culture in the city. Its etiology is not altogether clear. Undoubtedly the war being on foreign soil, existing yet unreal, had something to do with it. More important was a trend away from the laissez-faire tradition in the social domain; the American melting pot notion had not proved satisfactory, and the war made a more direct public intervention toward Americanization necessary.

The first target of Americanization was, of course, the teaching of German in the elementary schools, and by June 1918 this was ended. Other victims of the drive were German street names and library books, though abolition of the latter was more difficult to achieve. Then there was intimidation on the individual level. But the net effect of such super-patriotic harrassment on the German community was more psychological than physical. Those who suffered most were perhaps those who had never emerged from the protective cocoon the decaying German community was still able to offer them.

If on the Western Front the guns fell silent on Armistice Day, in Cincinnati, nativism continued as though the war had just begun.
And scurrilous it was. Even some who had once stood for moderation were now swept along, including newspapers, the medical society, and businessmen's clubs. Reason slowly returned, though such feelings were to linger in Cincinnati for some years to come. On the other hand, such sentiment was neither so powerful nor so persistent as to prevent some societies from re-emerging as soon as the nation was at peace, though the comeback was not easy. But one is struck by the German-Americans' utter inability to put their past sufferings to constructive use, and organized Germandom's
lower middle class mentality remained as firmly entrenched as ever. After the war, there was no longer a German community in Cincinnati, but an enclave of lonely, bitter men whose relative material well-being could never make up for their basic ineptitude in adjusting to the fate which had driven them here.

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The fact that the German community in Cincinnati had become moribund long before World War I raises some question as to the function of the immigrant community in American history. In Cincinnati, the community's physical disintegration was manifested not only in the decreasing rate of immigration but in its geographical dispersion, which separated the elite first physically and then psychologically from its rank and file. This had an adverse effect on leadership.

One may question, therefore, whether an immigrant community is still functionally justified in existing as a separate entity in a city which has evolved into a full-fledged metropolis. For at that stage the community is no longer able to maintain its social integration, but rather tends to degenerate into an ethnic enclave. As such it often becomes isolated from the rapid progress of a modern city, and easy prey to extremism of the left or right. While the nation can tolerate the existence of such "communities" in times of security and certainty, it can ill afford them in times of crisis.

Finally, has the role of the immigrant been properly assessed in United States history? Immigration history so far has laid considerable stress on either an ethnic group's collective achievements or on the individual's suffering, but has generally failed to strike a proper balance between its liabilities and assets on the development of the nation as a whole.