When the United States formally declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917, many Americans believed that the war involved both the battlefield in Europe and a fight against disloyal German Americans at home. Zealous patriots who considered German Americans to be enemy sympathizers, spies, or slackers demanded proof that immigrants were “100 percent American.” Across the country, but especially in the Midwest, where many German settlers had formed close-knit communities, the public pressured schools, colleges, and churches to discontinue the use of the German language. Local newspapers published the names of “disloyalists” and listed their offenses: speaking German, neglecting to donate to the Red Cross, declining to buy liberty bonds, resisting the draft, or refusing to fly an American flag. A Kansas City Star article published on June 9, 1918, warned German Americans in the small Pottawatomie County town of Onaga that “word has gone out the German language is not to be spoken on the streets of Onaga. There are enough patriotic citizens of the neighborhood to enforce the order and they promise to do it.” Wamego mayor Floyd Funnell declared, “We can’t hope to change the heart of the Hun but we can and will change his actions and his words.” Like-minded Kansans circulated petitions to protest schools that offered German language classes and churches that delivered sermons in German, while less peaceful protestors threatened accused enemy aliens with mob violence. In 1918 in Marion County, home to a thriving Mennonite community, this group of German American farmers posed before their tractor and threshing machinery with a large American flag in an attempt to prove their patriotism with a public display of loyalty. In the midst of a nationwide backlash against their heritage and culture, these farmers might not have been responding to a specific threat, but it may not have been a coincidence that the nearby Mennonite-affiliated Tabor College was burned to the ground in April 1918.
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