This anti-German handbill speaks to the suspicion and violence experienced by German Americans during World War I.
During World War I, or the Great War, as it was known at the time, German Americans in Kansas experienced suspicion and even violence from their neighbors. Germany was the "enemy" in the military hostilities in Europe, and because many of the ethnic Germans still spoke their native language, these Kansans were viewed with distrust. In addition, President Woodrow Wilson’s proclamation of November 16, 1917, gave the president powers to deal with enemy aliens: “all natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of the hostile nation government, being males of the age of fourteen or upward, who shall be within the United States, and not actually naturalized, shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured, and removed as alien enemies.” All of these circumstances combined to make ethnic Germans targets for threats and anti-German hysteria throughout Kansas and the Midwest. This article will share examples of the reactions of Kansans to those of German descent from primary sources available on Kansas Memory, the Kansas Historical Society’s online digital archive.¹

German immigrants had been part of the settlement of Kansas since the territorial period. They included a sizable number of Germans from Russia, who were known as Volga Germans. These immigrants, like those before them from all ethnic backgrounds, embraced life in Kansas and the United States. Many established successful businesses and farms, became involved in their communities, and were naturalized citizens. However, many of these ethnic Germans

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¹ Kansas Memory (KansasMemory.org) the Kansas Historical Society’s online digital archive, was started in 2004 and now contains over 500,000 items. An item can contain one image and/or document or multiple images or documents. Each item has a description, date, and source information such as the name of the collection or publication. For the “Presidential Proclamation of November 16, 1917,” see https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/USA/EnemyAlien2_1917.html.
German immigrants had been part of the settlement of Kansas since the territorial period. A sizable number were Germans from Russia known as Volga Germans, such as the men seen here harvesting wheat near Munjor, Kansas. Census numbers from the Kansas Board of Agriculture in 1905–1906 reported that Germans were the largest immigrant group in Kansas, encompassing approximately 3 percent of a total population of over 1.5 million.

German immigrants continued to speak their native language, participated in German-language churches and social institutions, and subscribed to the more than twenty German newspapers published in central Kansas communities alone. These practices led to the tensions that developed between ethnic Germans and their neighbors as U.S. involvement in the war in Europe increased.

The Volga Germans were descendants of Germans who had accepted Catherine the Great of Russia’s offer of free land and exemption from military service in 1762 and 1763. In 1762 Catherine II, a German princess, deposed her husband, Peter III, a German prince, and took the Russian imperial throne. Catherine the Great published manifestos in 1762 and 1763 inviting Europeans to immigrate and farm Russian lands while maintaining their language and culture. When the exemption from military service was revoked in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many of the Germans in Russia, including those from German Mennonite communities, immigrated to the United States because they were opposed to military service.


3. Experiences of Volga Germans in general and during World War I are described in the following volumes: Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Jacob C. Ruppenthal, “The German Element in Central
Understanding that German Americans in Kansas were from Germany as well as Russia is important to interpreting census numbers. In 1875 the Kansas Board of Agriculture report listed 17,345 Kansans who had been born in Germany. The largest concentrations were in Atchison and Leavenworth Counties. The *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Kansas Board of Agriculture*, covering the years 1905–06, reported that Germans were the largest immigrant group in Kansas, with 43,124 Kansans having been born in Germany. It also lists 11,535 residents who had been born in Russia. Assuming that most of those born in Russia were Volga Germans who had settled in central Kansas, ethnic Germans in Kansas were approximately 3 percent of a total population of over 1.5 million. However, the percentage was higher in Ellis, Russell, Barton, Rush, Marion, Harvey, Shawnee, and Wabaunsee Counties, where large numbers of German Americans had settled.4

As the war continued, antagonism toward German Americans grew and was expressed in various ways. Many were accused of being “slackers,” a term used to describe those perceived as disloyal to the United States. While the term seems fairly innocuous today, in the late 1910s, it was an emotional, pejorative term. Reports of slackers were sent to various public officials. A letter written to Governor Arthur Capper by the Ottawa County attorney Lee Jackson, dated June 8, 1918, illustrates the nature of the letters in the slackers file.

I have a letter concerning which I will appreciate any suggestion that you might care to make. One, Phil Crab of Ada, Kansas has refused to contribute anything toward the Red Cross, when asked to contribute $2. Some unknown person has hung a flag near his residence with the words “Slacker” painted on, and since Crab has given this but very little attention, it is now rumored that they are going to paint his house yellow and it seems that he has threatened the one that does so. It seems that he has made the remark that if the Government asks him to pay the amount...
of $25 he will do so; but not until they do ask him.
I was just wondering if you would care to take this
matter up with him direct or if you did not see fit to
do that, you might have suggestions to make.

Governor Capper wrote the county attorney that he
would write to Mr. Crab and did so on June 11, 1918.

I have received a letter from a citizen of your county
complaining that while you are a well-to-do man
you have refused to contribute to the Red Cross,
and is asking me to do something about it.
I hope this report is not true. All over the nation men
of small means, girls working on meagre salaries,
are sacrificing pleasures, comforts, and often-times
actual necessities in order to help the government.
I do not believe you want to put yourself in the list
of being a slacker or a disloyal citizen, and if the
statements made are correct I beg you to reconsider
your decision and to make, at once a liberal
contribution to the Red Cross. I am sure you do
not want to be known among the good people of
your community as a disloyal citizen. And the man
who fails to do his duty at this time certainly will be
remembered for all time as an undesirable citizen.

Capper or his personal secretary on the governor’s
behalf responded to dozens of this type of letter in a
similar fashion. The frankness of the letter reflected, it
would appear, the intensity of the perceived need for
everyone to support the war effort.

Another letter in this slackers file related to everyone
being treated equally by local draft boards. Governor
Capper responded to a letter from T. W. Stone Jr. of Elna,
Kansas, on May 4, 1918: “I received your letter of May
1, in regard to certain young men in your County who
seem to be in the slacker class. I thank you for sending
me this information and I will have it investigated by
the Government’s representatives. I am in favor of an
absolutely square deal in the Draft; with no favor to
anyone.”

In addition to reports of people not supporting the Red
Cross or Liberty Loan drives, the slackers file contained
reports of suspicious activities. On July 6, 1917, Charles
Sessions, secretary to Governor Capper, wrote to Fred
Robertson, the U.S. attorney of Kansas, to request an
investigation of possible German supporters in Wilson,
Kansas:

I believe you could do a powerful lot of good by
sending a secret service man out to Wilson, Kansas,
or Red Cross relate to the war. Other letters from the “Slackers” file are
cited in notes 6–9 by Kansas Memory location.

5. Lee Jackson, Ottawa County attorney, to Governor Arthur Capper,
June 8, 1918 (Kansas Memory Item Number 212615, page 122), box 36,
folder 11, General Correspondence, Alphabetical File, Special Subjects—
Slackers, Governor’s Papers, Arthur Capper, State Archives Division,
Kansas Historical Society, Topeka (hereafter cited as Governor’s Papers,
Capper). While there is just one folder labeled “Slackers,” other “named”
files such as Liberty Bonds and War Stamps, War Effort: Miscellaneous,

6. Governor Arthur Capper to Phil Crab, June 11, 1918, Kansas
Memory Item Number 207829, Ibid.

7. Governor Arthur Capper to T. W. Stone Jr., May 4, 1918, Kansas
Memory Item Number 212615, page 60, Ibid.
to round up one or two German sympathizers. There are many of them out there and if you could get one or two and soak them, it would have a most wholesome effect. Confidentially, C. L. Danner could help your secret service man considerably out there. I consider this important. I was out at Wilson not long ago and was told by several parties that patriotism was very low among a certain class of German sympathizers.⁸

On July 9, 1917, the U.S. attorney responded:

I have your kind favor of the sixth instant, suggesting the sending out of government agents to Wilson, Kansas, to round up certain German sympathizers. In your letter you suggest that I communicate with Mr. C. L. Danner. I was already in communication with Mr. Danner, and have had some very satisfactory correspondence with him. We have done what we could with our limited amount of help in looking after the pro-German situation out in that neighborhood. We have not done all that we should do, nor all that I hope to do very soon.⁹

Governor Capper received a number of letters from Mennonites and others that described efforts to show their loyalty to the United States. A letter from Reverend A. J. Dyck of the Hoffnungsaus Mennonite Church, Inman, dated April 23, 1918, to Governor Capper concerned the Third Liberty Loan drive and its impact on the German American community. Dyck explained that the members of his church had bought more than the amount of Liberty Loans required by the established quota in order to prove their loyalty and avoid harassment by “mobs.” In addition, Dyck asked Capper if it would be acceptable for members of his church to donate to the Red Cross rather than provide money to support the war effort.

In view of the fact that the great “Liberty Loan” drive has been made, and in view of the fact that our church, (Hoffnungsaus Mennonite) has contributed more than her quota to said loan, some papers speak of these non-combatant churches as changing their creeds. Now I hereby wish to say that such is not the case for we are loyal to our country which we so dearly love. And did contribute to said loan in order to show our loyalty as well as to avoid mobbing which so often happens. We as church made it an issue not to make this our war, a money making but a sacrificing war. Many do not wish to take the

⁸ Charles Session, secretary to Governor Capper, to Fred Robertson, U.S. attorney, July 6, 1917, Kansas Memory Item Number 212615, page 19, Ibid.
⁹ Fred Robertson to Charles Sessions, July 9, 1917, Kansas Memory Item Number 212615, page 20, Ibid.
interest on their bonds, while others would wish to give their bond to the “American Red Cross.” I hereby wish to know, whether giving the bond to the Red Cross is permitted or whether our Govt. would gladly endorse such action. Insuring you of my personal as well as our church loyalty.

The sentiments expressed in this letter illustrate the fact that Reverend Dyck believed his congregation was supporting the war effort to the greatest extent possible.

This was probably true for the majority of German Americans, who were loyal to the United States and did their part to support the effort. However, concerns about their loyalty persisted. The Presidential Proclamation of November 16, 1917, outlined places considered strategic to the war effort and set up zones that “enemy aliens” could not enter. The proclamation was enforced by registering residents who were not naturalized and requiring them to carry their registration permits at all times. If they were stopped by authorities and were not carrying their card, they faced possible imprisonment until the end of the war. A Topeka resident, Charles Schock, had a registration card and a permit to pass through areas that were considered off limits to resident aliens. Both documents contain photographs, but his occupation is not listed. Schock was a sixty-two-year-old resident of Topeka, and his permit allowed him to be near the statehouse and the fairgrounds. His wife, Verna, also had a registration card.

Newspaper articles with titles such as “Are You with or against the Hun?” “All Alien Enemies Liable to Arrest,” “Disloyalists Are Warned,” and “Use Tar and Feathers” helped to feed the unrest and anti-German hysteria. The Topeka Capital reported an anti-German incident in Wamego on June 5, 1918. A local bank president was viewed as disloyal, and so the state bank commissioner removed him. The banker, Louis B. Leach, was viewed as a slacker for not supporting Liberty Loan and Red Cross drives. It was also reported that he had encouraged his son-in-law to evade the draft.

10. A. J. Dyck to Governor Arthur Capper, April 23, 1918 (Kansas Memory Item Number 213464), box 13, folder 169, Governor’s Papers, Capper.

11. Alien registration card and permit for Charles Schock and alien registration card for Vena Peters Schock (Kansas Memory Item Numbers 213592, 213601, and 213599), Schock Family Collection #781, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka. These appear to be the only two registration cards in the Kansas Historical Society’s collections, but many more can be examined at the U.S. National Archives in Kansas City, Missouri.

12. “Are You with or against the Hun?” Canton Pilot, April 25, 1918, Kansas Memory, Kansas Memory Item Number 213526; “All Alien Enemies Liable to Arrest,” Topeka Capital, June 19, 1917, Kansas Memory Item Number 213497, from Espionage, Sedition, etc., Clippings Volume 1; “Disloyalists Are Warned,” Inman Review, April 26, 1918, Kansas Memory Item Number 213538; “Use Tar and Feathers,” McPherson Daily Republican, April 23, 1918, Kansas Memory Item Number 213529.
stated that the banker’s car had been painted yellow.\textsuperscript{13} This incident was the background for an article published by the \textit{Kansas City Star} on June 9, 1918, which was titled “On Trail of Disloyalty” with the subtitles “Pottawatomie County Kansas, Contains Many Slackers” and “Yellow Paint, Tar and Feathers Are Employed to Persuade the Unsympathetic to Aid in War Work.” The article stated,

Pottawatomie County is dotted with slackers and disloyalists. At Wamego, Westmoreland, Onaga, Duluth and Fostoria there appear to be the most active disloyalists in Kansas. They are against the government, against the draft, against the Red Cross, take no interest in the Y.M.C.A. and except under pressure, take little interest in the Liberty Loan. There is not just one or two in a community, but dozens. Most are Germans or of German descent. Many are wealthy. The greater the wealth, apparently, the less willing to give to the Red Cross and the more difficult to get subscriptions to such sterling securities as the Liberty Loan. But Pottawatomie County is on the yellow paint trail to loyalty. By July 4, the 100 per cent Americans assert, the county will be a decent place for a patriot to live in. The loyalists are going right down the line. It is either hush up, take a dose of yellow paint or get out. There is a pot of tar and an old feather bed stored carefully away in a handy nook in Wamego for second offenders.

The article reported that Pottawatomie had come to be known as disloyal because of its opposition to the draft. “There were 1,247 registrants June 5, 1917. Seven hundred of these appealed for exemption and deferred classifications. This is the largest number of appeals filed in any county, number of registrants considered.” The article stated that yellow paint had “been smeared around over seven residences, one motor car and two business buildings.”\textsuperscript{14}

Only a few newspapers reported actions such as those taken in Wamego, but the tone of anti-German sentiment in many Kansas newspapers was inflammatory. On April 6, 1917, the day the U.S. Congress declared war on Germany, the \textit{Newton Evening Kansas Republican} published an article that said,

The native American or naturalized American who is not openly for America first now may expect none of that patience that has been shown for him heretofore. With the United States in war with Germany, the only conclusion from continued attacks on the policy of this country by some of its citizens will be, obviously, that such individuals are not for America. There can be no neutrality on the part of Americans as between the United States and a foreign enemy, and the government not only shows wisdom but recognition of the sentiment of the great majority, in making provisions to deal promptly and effectively with any persons in this country who are disposed to make trouble for it, whether they be foreign reservists or American sympathizers with nations warring against us.\textsuperscript{15}

The September 13, 1917, \textit{Marion Record} published a story titled “German School Question.” It reported that “a sensational story carried in several daily papers recently, makes serious charges against the conduct of the schools in this county.” The first accusation was that several county schools were teaching in English for only five or six months, although the state law required seven months. The article claimed that the other two or three months were taught in German. The second inflammatory charge stated “that ‘the public school curriculum has been almost set aside’ and ‘Kaiser schools’ substituted; that the boys and girls are taught to honor the Kaiser and other German leaders and are taught nothing about American statesmen.” The story’s author wrote that the first charge was true but that “the second charge, we firmly believe, is wholly false.”\textsuperscript{16}

The districts in the county had been teaching several months in German, but when the war broke out, the practice was discontinued. The author stated that the practice had been changed because the school districts believed the public would not understand it.

Concerning the charge of teachings about the Kaiser, the newspaper stated, “We believe that it is not only untrue,
ON TRAIL OF DISLOYAL

POTTAWATOMIE COUNTY, KANSAS, CONTAINS MANY SLACKERS.

Yellow Paint, Tar and Feathers Are Employed to Persuade the Unsympathetic to Aid in War Work.

WAMEGO, Kansas, June 6—Pottawatomie County is dotted with slackers and disloyalists.

At Wamego, Westmoreland, Osage, Topeka and Pottawatomie there appear to be the most active disloyalists in Kansas.

They are against the government against the draft against the Red Cross. They take no interest in the Y. M. C. A. and, except under pressure, take little interest in the Liberty Loan.

There is not just one or two in a community, but dozens. Most are German Americans and of German descent. The greater the wealth, the more apparent, the less willing to give the Red Cross and the more difficult to get subscriptions to such sterling securities as the Liberty Loan.

But Pottawatomie County is on the yellow paint trail to loyalty. By July 4, 1918, few Americans asserted that the county will be a decent place for a patriot to live. The localities are going right down the line. It is either paint, a dose of yellow paint or get out. There is a pot of tar and an old feather bed stored carefully away in a handy nook in Wamego for second offenders. Inside the tar pot is a part by empty can of yellow paint and another full can.

“We have quite quarreling with folks because we are Americans,” said Floyd Furland, mayor of Wamego to a representative of The Star. “Until recently we have tried to argue with the slackers and Huns. Every time we mentioned we were Americans it brought on a brawl. Now it is different. Everybody in this neighborhood is going to be an American or ostensibly an American sympathizer.

Many claim they have changed the heart of the Hun but we can and will change his actions and his words.”

The ultimate went forth some time ago. A lot of slackers laughed then. But by the time the Second Red Cross


campaign was over there was an agreement to be a change in Wamego. The tone is changing now throughout the county and is spreading with considerable rapidity into Wabaunsee County, just across the river from Wamego. Wamego residents may have some yellow paint and some tar and featherers to spare for slackers and disloyalists in Wabaunsee County if people there do not apply the proper remedy.

The first outbreak of alleged disloyalty came last summer, when C. D. Ludwig, sheriff, announced he would not perform the duties of a draft officer for the government unless he were paid for it. Ludwig said at the time he was not opposed to America, but he was not willing to be forced to the war but demanded his way. As a result, he was removed from the draft board and the sheriff’s job.

The Democrats of Pottawatomie will have a fine chance of proving their loyalty August 6. Ludwig is a candidate for re-election for sheriff on the Democratic ticket. Bert Kersey and J. H. Plummer are running against him. There is great fear that two candidates against Ludwig may enable him to win the nomination.

Thus far only yellow paint has been applied to slackers in Pottawatomie. But it has been smeared around over seven residences, one movie theater and two business establishments. Its first use was at Westmoreland, where the Schleissman butcher shop was tarred and feathered.

When Ludwig said Schleissman failed to report, “most emphatic[ally]” denied that the curriculum had been disregarded and “indignant[ly]” denied that ‘Kaiserism’ has been taught in any way or that the Kaiser or other German leaders have been lauded and American statesmen ignored. These men say that they not only welcome but that they urge the most thorough investigation as to just what was taught.”

A teacher from the Gnadenau school said that the teachings in German focused on reading, writing, spelling, and religious instruction. The study of the Bible and church history was done in German because many of the older generation did not speak English, so church services were conducted in German. He also stated that “the Kaiser is never mentioned in this school, that the people of that community have no use whatever for the Kiser and his militaristic system, that they left Germany and went to Russia to get away from it and that they left Russia for a similar reason.”

The author of the article wrote that disloyalty should be punished, but claims of disloyalty should not be made without any factual basis. The article stated that a majority of German Americans were loyal to the United States. It concluded, “Such talk as referring to Marion County as ‘a German province’ is not only foolish but in a time like this may be fraught with consequences very harmful to the country.”

Removal from employment was not the only “weapon” against slackers. As this article published by the Kansas City Star on June 9, 1918, indicates, some Kansas towns took serious action against those believed to be disloyal. Under the headline “Pottawatomie County Kansas Contains Many Slackers,” the author described the identification of slackers through the use of yellow paint as well as the more violent practice of tarring and feathering—a tactic used by the Sons of Liberty against tax collectors prior to the American Revolution. Only a few newspapers reported such actions as those taken in Wamego, but the tone of anti-German sentiment in many Kansas newspapers was inflammatory.

but that its publication does great injustice and has a very harmful effect in this time calling for less and not more racial antagonism.” Reports “from teachers and from school officers in the districts in question,” continued the
2, 1918, summarizes the contributions of members of Lutheran churches to the war effort. Although Reverend Vogel wrote about members of his denomination, these activities were typical of most German Americans in Kansas.

If the public wants proof for our loyalty let it examine or ask for the records of the government where it will find, that thousands and thousands of Lutheran young men have flocked to the colors at the call of our country and are now serving under the stars and stripes. Far more have volunteered than have been summoned. These young men, the flower of our country and the flower of our church are today offering their life and their blood in defense of our country. (U.S.A.)

And, as we have sent our boys, we have sent our dollars. Our Synod . . . has purchased $50000 (our local congregation of Humboldt Kansas $8000.00) worth of Liberty Bonds. We have done as much, if not more, than any single denomination for our government. Yes, indeed, the members of the Lutheran Church in America loaned and donated several millions of dollars to help down Prussianism.19

These examples from Kansas Memory and other items on the web site and in the collections of the Kansas Historical Society suggest that German Americans in Kansas, whether settled in the state for a number of years or recent arrivals, were loyal to their new state and country. We have, however, sampled only a fraction of the material available on this topic at kansasmemory.org. The digital archives of the Kansas Historical Society offer researchers an effective starting point for work on an array of Kansas history issues, but they represent only a fraction of the sources available in the research collections of the State Archives. [KH]

19. W. T. Vogel, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Humboldt, Kansas, May 2, 1918, to Governor Arthur Capper (Kansas Memory item 213476), box 14, folder 231, Governor’s Papers, Capper.