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'Cleansing' German American culture

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'11/11 11:11' was the 9/11 of 90 years ago "9/11": the cultural icon of our fearful, belligerent age. But 90 years ago Tuesday another national struggle found its own numeric cultural icon: "11/11 11:11" -- the date and time of the armistice that ended the First World War, at eleven minutes past the eleventh hour on 11 November, 1918.

Whether or not we are now engaged in a "clash of civilizations," the war that 9/11 has brought us has been exceptional. We have examined our consciences and we have raised our consciences.

Even right after 9/11 we were most careful not to declare our enemy to be Islam itself, much less American Muslims and Arab Americans. We studied their culture and religion, learned to distinguish Shia and Sunni. Students rushed to take Arabic, and the government rushed to fund Middle-Eastern language and area studies programs.

But 11/11 11:11 was different. Along with victory over Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, it symbolizes something that began no later than 1914: the linguistic extinction and cultural devastation of the largest ethnic minority in American history, the German American population.

Picture an ethnic group which was then larger in proportion to the American population than is the Hispanic community now. But as WWI approached, that group was identified, in the minds of many other Americans, with an ominous and superbly skilled enemy that, like the al-Qaida and Taliban of our time, showed evident disdain for human lives.

Then came an attack on a symbol of modern technology and commerce: In 1915 a German submarine sank the ocean liner Lusitania. Nearly 1,200 people died, among them 124 Americans. (Only much later did the inconvenient truth emerge that the liner was secretly carrying armaments



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World War I war bond posters depicted Germans in ways similar to today's hate-group caricatures of Arab faces.



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(only, much later, did the immigrants then emerge that the ship had secretly, carrying armaments to Britain.)

After America declared war, the pretense of neutrality gave way to outright vilification. The German enemy, even in official pronouncements, was the "Hun." German faces in war-bond posters then looked as monstrous as Arab faces do in today's hate-group caricatures. The Enemy was perceived to have an anti-democratic, anti-Western world view, and to speak a difficult, "guttural" language. In Collinsville, Ill., a German-born drifter was lynched for uttering pro-German sentiments.

Before 11/11 11:11 it had been possible to obtain, right here in the United States, a complete education, through the college level, with German as the chief language of instruction. Suddenly, even the teaching of German as a high-school foreign language was outlawed in many areas. Churches were pressured to change the language of their services from German to English. Streets with German names were renamed. Sauerkraut became "victory cabbage." Even earlier, in 1915, Theodore Roosevelt had declared that there was no room in America for "hyphenated Americans." President Wilson echoed him.

Northeastern Nebraska, the home of my parents and grandparents, was then, and still is, a heavily German American area. My grandfather was a minister who had come to the U.S. as a youth. He was educated here, in German-speaking institutions. He became a citizen, and was often invited to lead singing of the national anthem at public events. Even so, he was required to travel some distance to give an oath of loyalty. A gang entered his church, removed religious books printed in German, and burned them. Such outrages were common, not isolated incidents.

Of course, that was far from genocide, ethnic cleansing or internment. The harsher treatment of thousands of Japanese Americans in 1941 was not solely a consequence of racism, but also of demographics. Internment of the millions of German Americans during WWI would have emptied major cities and large parts of many states. It's not just that the war effort would have suffered; the entire national economy would have been destroyed. How could the many German Americans in public office, including many mayors and police, have carried out their own internment? And what about all those German American soldiers, including one named Eisenhower?

German culture was then far more deeply rooted and widely spread outside its ethnic base than the Arab Muslim or even Hispanic cultures are now, or Japanese culture was in 1941. The arts and the educational institutions would have been devastated by internment of German American citizens or even just of German nationals long resident in America. German-born scientists and technologists were everywhere. Major league baseball would have been crippled by the loss of Babe Ruth and the many other German American players.

So, the people stayed. But their language and culture were extirpated. In that one sense, the Japanese Americans during WWII may have had it better.


This "ethnicity cleansing" of German Americans, as it might be called, was also assisted suicide. When WWI came, German Americans, like Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor, tried to prove their loyalty by obvious signs of Americanization. They served in the military, with distinction. Pershing, the supreme American commander, was a German American. Not a few became rabid Americanizers and cultural vigilantes. Shortly before my father died, he added something to the story about the vandalism of my grandfather's church: "Your mother's brother was one of the leaders of the gang."


The less virulent version of group self-rejection was a readiness -- not unique to German Americans then -- to quietly embrace the many advantages the "melting pot" offered. Since many German Americans were native speakers of English, and white, a superficial assimilation was easy. Within a generation the deeper assimilation became almost total. Not at the end of the war against the Nazis, as many people believe, but rather with 11/11 11:11.


Today there is ample political and financial support to help keep the hyphens, for those groups who still have theirs. Throughout the world there is earnest talk of reparations and homelands and

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native-language place names. So should German Americans clamor for a national apology, or even reparations? Bury my heart at Lake Wobegon?

Let's not be silly. There is no way to revive a language and ethnic identity that have vanished almost without trace. Perhaps, then, symbolic reparation? Restore old German street names, just as we liberally relabel other streets as "King" and "Naito"? Not enough guilt, not enough votes, not enough German American ethnic pride, to get Portland's Lafayette Street changed back to Frankfort, and Pershing back to Frederick. Giving back to our local Bush Street its original name of Bismarck Street might have a little more appeal.

German Americans? We're history. No, they're history, because I am scarcely one myself, and my children are not in the least. I learned German in high school, as a "foreign" language. Two of my daughters started Japanese in kindergarten -- hey! it's a German word! -- in a school system where German language programs have all but died out. It troubles me when my language students call me "Herr Fischer."

Yet we can derive a scrap of typically optimistic American self-reassurance from 11/11 11:11. As we continue to deal with 9/11, it is not solely the experience of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor that can remind us to avoid the mistakes of the past -- and also reassure us that our country has indeed come a long way since 1941. We have come further still since 1918, since 11/11 11:11, which we have largely forgotten.

Gott segne Amerika. And He has. I wonder what the Arab American and Muslim American communities will look like in 2091, 90 years after 9/11. Pretty American, probably. But not totally American, I hope. A hyphen is a terrible thing to waste.

William B. Fischer is a professor of German in the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures at Portland State University: fischerw@pdx.edu

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marksabatino

November 09, 2008 at 10:24AM

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good article, good points, and yes, it is sad that the German culture disappeared in America, although assimilated could be a better word. Television and movies have done a great disservice to the Germans in America, constantly painting them as cruel nazis. It will take a few generations to forget the first and second world war. Nevertheless, Germans are a systematic and workaholic people. Their products are excellent and their businesses first rate. You have a proud history, Mr. Fisher.

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We are AMERICANS Herr Fischer; we have all descended from a great diversity of cultures. Your Grandfather's culture wasn't merely assimilated, it became a great piece to the patchwork of the American quilt, and it changed the nature of what being an American was destined to be. We stand together as one, and that's what makes America great; not as a mere conglomeration of ethnicities- that only invites, elitism, suspicion, distrust, exclusion and territoriality.

Study the causes of and the motives to partake in WW1 more in depth (I invite you to read the Pulitzer Prize winning book- The Guns of August, Barbara W. Tuchman, 1963) and you will more appreciate what hyphenated ethnic division can do.

-John L. Nash
A descendent of tea sippers
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