WWI, Alien Enemies, and the FBI

At the turn of the 20th century, German-Americans made up the largest ethnic group in the country. Many had naturalized and were enjoying their freedoms as American citizens. Organizing societies and social clubs, attending churches which held traditional services in the German language and reading German language newspapers helped keep them connected to their native culture.

Events leading up to the start of World War I and news reports documenting atrocities by the German government and army resulted in a heightened awareness of all things German. Suddenly anyone with German heritage or what was conceived as German heritage became suspect.

The creation of the National Security League and the American Defense Society only increased the anti-German sentiments. All of a sudden, these groups had the authority to decide who was a true patriotic American. With persecution against the German language, German newspapers ceased publication, German language instruction in schools and universities ended, and churches stopped conducting religious services in German.

The sinking of the Lusitania and the release of the Zimmerman telegram only added to the hysteria. President Woodrow Wilson, like many Americans wanted to remain neutral. When Germany sank an American ship on April 6, 1917, Wilson had no choice but to declare war.

In his declaration of war, Wilson outlined 12 proclamations directing the conduct of German aliens residing in the country. By April 13, he authorized the creation of the Committee on Public Information encouraging citizens to report suspicious activities of their German neighbors. Employing anti-German propaganda tactics, this committee only increased paranoia and condoned harassment.

New laws were passed that restricted speech and criticism of the government even though they violated freedom of speech and Constitutional rights. German aliens, both male and female were required to register and notify the authorities if their address changed.

Towns, buildings, streets, and business which had German names changed their names to reflect their loyalty. Some German families changed their names as well.

With paranoia raging, suspicious citizens were arrested and interred. Considered enemy aliens, these citizens were held or kept under house arrest until the end of the War.

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Resources

Old German Files, 1909-1921 make up the largest part of the FBI case files, M1085. They have been digitized and are available on the *Fold3* database.

The Department of Justice (Record Group 60) was the agency which determined who should be interned. The Alien Enemy Index, 1917-1919 (National Archives Identifier [NAID] 602456 is a set of alphabetically-arranged index cards giving the alien’s name, subject matter, judicial district, and related file number.

Other files may be contained in the following:

Records of the Adjutant General’s Office (Record Group 407) who was responsible for the operation of the internment camps

US District Court Records (Record Group 21) which may contain case files---check the National Archives Regional location responsible for the courts in the area where your ancestor lived

To request a record search of the Department of Justice and Adjutant General’s Office, send an email to archives2reference@nara.gov. Submit a separate request for each Record Group. Include the alien’s name, state of residence, Record Group, and record series to be searched. Include your name, mailing address, email address, and phone number.