

Against the “Hun”: Anti-Germanism at the Seattle Public Schools and the
University of Washington, 1917-1918

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In the years prior to the United States entry into World War I in April 1917, there was a rise in momentum for nativism and “100 percent Americanism.” This movement desired to “stamp out all traces of Old World identity among immigrants” in order to create, as former President Theodore Roosevelt’s maxim went, an “AMERICA FOR AMERICANS.”¹ The historian John Higham writes that “by threat and rhetoric 100 per cent Americanizers . . . set about to stampede immigrants into citizenship, into adoption of the English language, and into an unquestioning reverence for existing American institutions.”² In short, the nativists demanded conformity and complete assimilation of all immigrants. Roosevelt, who led this attack on “hyphenated-Americans,” once wrote that there should be an assault against “those who spiritually remain foreigners in whole or in part.”³ Even President Woodrow Wilson went along with the “anti-hyphenate” campaign. In 1915, during his third annual message to Congress, he said:

There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life. . . . Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.⁴

Thus, when the United States entered the Great War, already present was a form of xenophobia and a desire to instill undivided loyalty in all Americans, including those of German descent.

¹ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 67; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 198.

² Higham, p. 247.

³ Quoted in Higham, p. 199.

⁴ Quoted in Kennedy, p. 24.

Prior to the First World War, German-Americans⁵ enjoyed high regard as an immigrant group in America. As Higham writes, they were repeatedly praised as “law-abiding, speedily assimilated, and strongly patriotic.”⁶ But when the United States entered the war, anti-German agitation soon escalated throughout America. The war acted as a super-catalyst towards the already growing movement of nativism and “100 percent Americanism,” demanding full patriotism and universal conformity from all Americans, especially those of German descent. The President of the National German-American Alliance, a German-born citizen named Fred Klinger, described the position in which German-Americans found themselves: “We feel like a man who must sharpen a knife for his wife to cut his mother’s throat; it goes without saying that we are bound in honor to support this country loyally if worst comes to worst.”⁷ We shall see, however, that many German-Americans found it impossible to cut all ties to the Fatherland. Some could not help but defend the German language and culture, often not realizing the indiscretion of such actions, and as a result, they were viewed by the American public with suspicion. Added to these expectations were powerful uses of anti-German propaganda from leading public figures and the American media, such as the use of the pejorative “Hun” instead of “German” in newspapers, which undoubtedly helped to create a negative stigma towards things German.⁸

When all these forces combined, a huge wave of hysteria was soon unleashed against the German-American population. German-Americans immediately became suspected of disloyalty, underwent immense scrutiny, and suffered discrimination. Already in April 1917, one can find

⁵ Throughout this paper, I often use the term “German-Americans.” I would like to clarify that by “German-Americans” I mean any person of German descent living in America during this period of time, regardless if they were born in Germany or in the United States, whether an American citizen or not yet naturalized.

⁶ Higham, p. 196.

⁷ “The German-American,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 5, 1917, p. 6.

⁸ Major newspapers across America began to use this derogatory word around May or June 1917, following what British newspapers had been doing since the start of the war.

numerous examples across America of vandalism targeting German clubs, German-Americans physically attacked or arrested for speaking out against the war or President Wilson, and other forms of anti-German agitation.⁹

The types of discrimination that would be perhaps the most enduring, however, were the attacks against the teachers of German descent and against the German language. While vandalism, harsh punishments, and acts of violence directed towards German-Americans would greatly subside by the time the peace treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919, the German language in America nearly drifted away to extinction in the 1920s, and many teachers of German would find themselves unemployed. Throughout college campuses and high schools across America, teachers of German descent were spied upon by both fellow teachers, students, and patriotic citizens, leading to numerous claims of disloyalty, and, for some, the loss of their jobs—often for alleged actions and utterances supported only by hearsay evidence, biased testimony, or no real proof at all.¹⁰ Others would lose their jobs because the demand for the teaching of the language plummeted dramatically: as a result of the great public agitation over the teaching of the German language in the winter of 1917-18, many students decided (or were pressured by parents, friends, and others) to disassociate themselves from the hated enemy language by boycotting German classes. In 1915 approximately 24.4% of all high school students nationwide took German, but by 1922, less than 1% took German classes.¹¹ Similarly,

⁹ When the Espionage Act became law on June 15, 1917, it gave the government strong powers to suppress those who opposed the war, including fines up to \$10,000 and imprisonment up to 20 years. But even before the law was passed, many German-Americans were arrested. See H.C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of the War, 1917-1918* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), Chapter 2.

¹⁰ See Peterson and Fite, Chapter 10, for many instances where German teachers and professors all across America were dismissed for suspected disloyalty. A further example can be found in Henry D. Sheldon, *History of University of Oregon* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1940), p. 198: “Herman Schwarz, new German professor who just came from Germany, guilty of nothing more than taking long walks and being untactful in manner, aroused so much suspicion that he was advised to leave before a public protest occurred.”

¹¹ Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School, 1880-1920* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 407.

drastic reductions in the enrollment of students taking German occurred at the universities as well.

Seattle, Washington proved to be representative of the two types of anti-Germanism in the education field. The attacks on the loyalty of teachers of German descent and the attack on the German language that occurred at both the University of Washington and Seattle Public Schools appear to be typical of what happened elsewhere across the nation. The real importance of this paper, however, is not to prove that such events in Seattle were common across America. Rather, this paper intends to use the events in Seattle as a case-study in how anti-Germanism actually operated at educational institutions and why it came about.¹²

In Seattle, anti-German hysteria at the University of Washington and in the Seattle Public Schools progressively worsened over three periods of time. For the first few months after the U.S. entry into World War I, the German language and culture were tolerated fairly well by Seattleites. But after a professor of German at the University of Washington and a teacher of German in a Seattle Public School made indiscreet public statements and utterances during the summer and winter of 1917, the public responded with great uproar and charges of disloyalty. Because of the vulnerability of youth, much of Seattle's adult population feared that disloyal teachers would corrupt the minds of their students with pro-German ideas, which would then prevent the youth from becoming proper patriotic citizens. During the winter of 1917-1918, such fears were extended to the teaching of the German language as a whole. In this third phase, the German language itself was determined to be disloyal, and the teaching of it was deemed to be

¹² Few historians have sufficiently written about how anti-Germanism operated at American educational institutions during World War I. Somewhat of an exception is Bryce E. Nelson's *Good Schools: the Seattle Public School System, 1901-1930* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988). In this book, the author offers some treatment of the situation at the Seattle Public Schools. But Nelson doesn't go into as much detail as this paper will, nor does he connect any of the events that happened at the Seattle Public Schools with those that happened at the University of Washington.

dangerous for the youth of Seattle because all classes were believed to be full of pro-German propaganda. Adding fuel to the fire, the hatred of all things German reached its peak during this period of time. The extreme hysteria against the German language eventually resulted in a great reduction in the enrollment in German language classes at the University of Washington and in the Seattle Public Schools, which ultimately necessitated the firings of most of the teachers of German who had not already been let go for suspected disloyalty.

Against the German Teacher

For the most part, very few complaints were to arise from American citizens in Seattle about German culture, literature, or language during the first few months following the U.S. entry into the war. At the University of Washington, no seething hatred can be found in any articles from the student newspaper of the institution. Instead, one can find articles which signify tolerance of the German language, literature, and culture. At the end of April, for example, an article reporting about an upcoming meeting of the Deutscher Verein (the German Club at the University of Washington) to commemorate the great German poet Frederick von Schiller received a spot on the front page of the *University of Washington Daily*. One month later, an announcement was made that an original German play written by members of Professor R. H. Ernst's German class would be repeated a second time "by request" (it had been performed the week before at the last meeting of the Deutscher Verein).¹³ Such articles indicate that not only was German culture still tolerated, but also that the interest level in it remained quite high.

In addition, some Seattle newspapers, which would later be permeated with jingoistic positions against anything and everything German, wrote that most German-Americans should be accepted as true Americans and that many were just as patriotic as any other ethnic group that

¹³ "German Club to Honor Memory of Great Poet," *University of Washington Daily*, April 25, 1917, p. 1 ; "Original German Play Will be Given Again," *University of Washington Daily*, May 28, 1917, p.3.

populated the nation. One writer for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was clearly tired of nativists questioning the loyalty of foreign-born Americans: “There should be no more talk of hyphenated Americanism. Men in this country who were born here, and those who have come from foreign shores and taken the oath of allegiance, are alike Americans, and nothing else It is an artificial barrier, cultivated in small prejudices, that means nothing.”¹⁴ Two weeks later *The Town Crier* published an editorial speaking out against “pinhead patriotism,” in which the author was agitated by a local citizen who desired to eliminate German names from the menus at restaurants. The author discouraged such ideas and asked for them to be suppressed, for he clearly agreed with President Wilson’s statement that the nation had “no quarrel with the German people: no feeling toward them but one of sympathy and friendship.”¹⁵ Thus, although some citizens were already fully disgusted with all things German, it appears that a majority of the Seattle population still tolerated, and had a fairly high regard for, Americans of German descent and German culture during the first months after the U.S. entry into World War I.

It was in this apparently tolerant climate that a lecture given in the summer of 1917 at the University of Washington would create a great storm of protest from the Seattle public against the professor who gave the speech. The ensuing uproar did not just affect the professor in question; it spread to the office of the President of the University, members of the University District community, and throughout the city as a whole. During the summer session at the University, a series of public lectures was given by various instructors on a diverse range of topics. Professor F. W. Meisnest, head of the German department, was one of those instructors, and on June 25, 1917, he delivered a lecture in English entitled “Germany is Faust, not Hamlet.” In the lecture, Meisnest discussed Germany’s contributions to science, industry, politics, and

¹⁴ “All Americans,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 4, 1917, p. 6.

¹⁵ “Pinhead Patriotism,” *Town Crier*, April 21, 1917, p. 5.

social welfare, and argued that since 1870, Germany had been more like Faust, the man of action, than like Hamlet, the hesitating philosopher she once resembled.

A copy of the notes Meisnest used for his lecture have survived the years, and from it we can gain some useful insight to what he probably said in his actual speech. After briefly praising the great German literary writers, philosophers, and composers of the 18th and 19th centuries, Meisnest mentioned that the period lacked significant political leadership, and as a result, few German advancements made any impact on the rest of the world. But since the time Bismarck came to power in the 1860s and 1870s, there were a number of significant contributions Germany had made to better society. It appears that Meisnest spent most of his speech quoting exclusively from American and English authors to demonstrate the universal opinion that Germany's advancements in education, industry, social welfare, and politics were well respected and highly praised by the rest of the world. For example, the lecture notes indicate that Meisnest probably quoted from a female English author to suggest Germany's successful use of social welfare: "Germany's so-called slums are places which compared to our notions are paradises of law and order." He then ended his speech with a quote from former President Theodore Roosevelt, published in September of 1914: "Every public man, every writer who speaks with wanton offensiveness of a foreign power or of a foreign people, whether he attacks England or France, whether he assails the Russians or the Japanese, is doing an injury to the whole body politic."¹⁶ With this last quote, Meisnest probably believed Roosevelt's statement should be applied to the current situation in regards to Germany, suggesting he believed that the anti-German hysteria in Seattle and elsewhere was injurious to America alone.

¹⁶ "Germany is Faust, Not Hamlet," p. 6, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, University of Washington Libraries (hereafter cited as UWL).

The lecture notes indicate that Professor Meisnest made no reference to the present war, and that he did not glorify the German government at the expense of the United States. But the lecture still upset a number of people in the audience of 140 that evening: in the middle of his speech, eight persons became very upset and noisily left the auditorium.¹⁷ These eight, however, were clearly a minority in the audience, as the lecture “was listened to with tense attention and released a huge storm of applause which grew to an ovation for Professor Meisnest.”¹⁸ Regardless, the protest of the lecture would not end with this rude disruption from a few listeners. On the contrary, it was to be just the beginning of a long fight against Meisnest.

The very next day, President Henry Suzzallo received a number of telephone calls and letters disapproving of Meisnest’s speech, some of which demanded his removal from the University. In response to such complaints, Suzzallo issued the following statement:

There have been a number of complaints filed against Professor Meisnest’s recent lecture. Thus far none of the complainants has been willing to testify that there was a single seditious statement made, but the testimony is not yet complete. It must be perfectly obvious to everyone that a professor who would make a single seditious statement could not remain in this university longer than the time necessary to notify him of his dismissal.¹⁹

Two things stand out in Suzzallo’s statement. First, it is very interesting that none of the protesters was willing to stand by his or her complaints. This suggests that the nativists who

¹⁷ “Praise Given Germany is Too Much For Some”, *The University Journal*, June 27, 1917, p. 1 ; “Germany is Faust, not Hamlet,” *Seattle German Press*, June 26, 1917. The *Seattle German Press* reported the following: “A very martial-looking gentleman left the place burning with anger, and a number of ladies joined him, who rudely tried and failed to prove the superiority of their Anglo-Saxon ideology. It remained unclear why these people were so upset, as the professor hardly ever mentioned the United States, and as was mentioned before, he based his presentation exclusively on American and English authors.” (Note: all articles from the *Seattle German Press* are translated from German into English by William and Mary Branom).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Quoted from “Meisnest Lecture is Put Before Suzzallo,” *The University Journal*, June 29, 1917, p. 1.

charged Meisnest with disloyal conduct had no real proof that the professor did anything wrong. Instead, it is quite possible that the nativists of Seattle were simply making a hullabaloo out of a rumored disloyal statement they had not actually heard with their own ears. Second, it is clear that President Suzzallo was resolute in not allowing any form of disloyalty at the University. Not only was the University highly involved in the war effort, but Suzzallo was also a strong supporter of the war. He probably believed that any public opposition to the war in any form was out of place for a governmental institution like the University of Washington, and thus he would not tolerate any disloyalty.

Professor Meisnest himself was quite shocked that a protest even came about, and stated that the accusations that his lecture expressed pro-German sentiments were ridiculous. In the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, he explained what the goal of his lecture was: “Instead of having any unpatriotic motive in giving the lecture, my motive was exactly the opposite. . . . I desired the audience to draw the influence of Germany’s [st]rength so that we would have some idea of what this country has to combat and not, like England, underestimate the German power.”²⁰ This explanation must not have been fully accepted by the public, for on the same day this article was published, Meisnest would be forced to explain his lecture more completely before the President of the University and a number of citizens from the community.

Twelve people from the University District formed a committee and, on June 29th, marched to President Suzzallo’s office, where they indignantly protested Professor Meisnest’s speech. The *Seattle German Press* printed a lengthy article on this meeting with the following title and subtitle: “Storm of Provocation – Professor F. W. Meisnest’s lecture has created a civil war in the University District.”²¹ Only five members of this “Committee of Twelve” had

²⁰ “Suzzallo Probes Meisnest Talk,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 29, 1917, p. 11.

²¹ “Storm of Provocation,” *Seattle German Press*, July 1, 1917, p. 4.

actually attended the lecture, and these people made up the line of attack against Professor Meisnest:

The chief witness was even an Englishman, who had recently dropped in from British Honduras and who wanted to drum into all Seattleites' heads the true meaning of American patriotism. Besides him were three ladies who, as was apparent from their comments, obviously did not understand the lecture very well. Finally there was an American with them, who, however, was very reserved and quiet.²²

The rest of the committee seems to have been made up of prominent businessmen from the University District. In President Suzzallo's office, the committee members voiced their opinions in front of Suzzallo, Dean of the Faculty Herbert T. Condon, and Meisnest himself. The prominent members of the group said that the lecture was perhaps not in keeping with the times. But others wanted to go much farther, as the *Seattle German Press* reported:

The ladies, led by the Anglo-Saxon upholder of culture from Honduras, were, however a bit stormier. They accused Professor Meisnest of all kinds of crimes, above all, however, of treason. Some demanded stormily the summary firing of the professor; not all, however, seemed to be satisfied with that, and many of those present seemed to have the humane intention of placing Professor Meisnest on the wall and to take his life.²³

Fortunately for Meisnest, President Suzzallo was not going to allow things to get so far out of hand. Suzzallo sent the committee out with the promise of investigating the matter further. Meisnest, however, was still under great public pressure, and would have to go before a second committee the same day. Members from the Commercial Club in the University District grilled Meisnest on a number of questions regarding his lecture and personal background, to try

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

to independently gauge the severity of Meisnest's actions. Meisnest first mentioned how the Dean of the Summer School had sent for outlines in January and February, and had asked for topics of lectures to be given during the summer session. He thus developed and wrote his lecture before the American entry into the First World War, a time when neutral or anti-war positions were still very much accepted by the American public. He told the committee that he knew the subject was out of place at the present time, and that he would not have used the lecture he gave, but that there was not enough time to prepare another lecture.²⁴ One may jump to the conclusion that Meisnest was simply trying to make up an excuse for the subject matter he chose, but it seems as if he truly did not have time to prepare another lecture. When a reporter for *The University Journal*, the student newspaper at the University of Washington for the summer session, asked Professor Meisnest on June 22, 1917 about his upcoming lecture, the professor had clearly forgotten about it: "“What, so soon?” exclaimed Mr. Meisnest. ‘Oh! I promised to give that speech after the first week, and yes, this is the second week.’” Furthermore, Professor Meisnest mentioned that he had planned a weekend excursion, but that he'd now have to postpone the trip and devote his time to editing the lecture, because the American entry into the war had changed matters.²⁵ Thus, it appears that Meisnest did not have time to come up with a new topic, and could only try to amend his speech as best as possible, so as to make it more timely and inoffensive.

But despite his efforts, the lecture turned out to be offensive to some. He said that one of his objectives was “to correct certain common misrepresentations and misunderstandings that are made daily in the press [and] by word of mouth” about Germany. He also stated that he “emphasized Germany’s strength in various fields of life, education, social industries, literature,

²⁴ “Notes from the Interview with Committee from Commercial Club in the University District and Dr. Meisnest”, June 29, 1917, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

²⁵ “Germany is Faust, But War Affects That, Too,” *The University Journal*, June 22, 1917, p. 3.

philosophy, [and] municipal government in order to point out Germany's real strength. The first man who spoke to me after the lecture said that 'we have got to realize Germany's strength and work accordingly.'"²⁶ In other words, Meisnest argued that he was simply doing his patriotic duty in bringing to light the power and strength of Germany. He believed that it would be beneficial for America not to underestimate the enemy, but rather to try to understand it, or else victory would be much more difficult to achieve. In addition, he argued that "[t]he more a nation is slandered, the more [it is] misunderstood, the worse it is for our country."²⁷ Given this reasoning, it makes sense, then, that he ended his speech with the quote by Theodore Roosevelt.

The committee suggested that Meisnest was a paid German agent, which the professor fervently denied. He replied that a "charge like this is something that makes a man's blood boil."²⁸ When asked to which country he was loyal, he replied: "My sympathies are with the U.S." At the end of the interview, Meisnest confirmed that he was an American citizen, and furthermore born in Wisconsin (one of his parents was born in Germany, the other in Austria). The committee found that Professor Meisnest had not made any treasonable or seditious statements, but that his speech was out of place given the circumstances. Mr. Stone, a member of the committee, said that "laudation of the German government [is] out of taste. That is our sentiment. The general statement is that it ought to be stopped."²⁹ Thus ended the second interview with Meisnest, and it might have seemed to him that the furor surrounding his lecture would come to an end as well.

The case, however, was still far from over. President Suzzallo did not have the time necessary to conduct a full investigation because he was quite busy as both President of the

²⁶ "Notes from the Interview with Committee from Commercial Club in the University District and Dr. Meisnest," June 29, 1917, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

University and Chairman of the Washington State Council of Defense. Under Suzzallo's leadership, the State Council of Defense carried out a number of war-related activities, including the dissemination of propaganda, the supervision of war loans and bond drives, the promotion of food conservation, the investigation of disloyalty, and the settlement of labor disputes.³⁰ Since he was often absent from the University with other obligations, Suzzallo asked the University of Washington's War Emergency Committee to investigate the Meisnest case further. The committee was made up of twenty-two faculty members who were appointed by Suzzallo in March 1917, and whose job was "to consider the relation of the University to the nation in case of war. This committee served as the director and clearing house of university war activities throughout the war. . . ."³¹

Suzzallo sent a letter on July 10th, 1917 to Professor H.G. Byers, Chairman of the War Emergency Committee, alerting him to the situation and asking for his committee to determine what the obligations of professors are during war, and if Professor Meisnest had met these obligations based on his attitude and conduct. Suzzallo once again made clear that he was not going to tolerate any disloyalty during times of war:

It must be plain that the ordinary ethics of academic life do not apply to our present situation in this University. We are at war and our national safety is at stake.

Furthermore, this University is a governmental institution, supported by one of the forty-eight states of a Federal Union now at war with Germany.³²

³⁰ Charles M. Gates, *The First Century at the University of Washington, 1861-1961* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), p. 153.

³¹ Quote from the Minutes of the Board of Regents in: Frederick E. Bolton, "History of the University of Washington," unpublished manuscript, pp. 35-37, Box 14/Chapters 14-16, Frederick E. Bolton Papers, Acc. 194-70-1, UWL, p. 29.

³² Henry Suzzallo to Professor H.G. Byers, 10 July 1917, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

From this letter, it is obvious that Suzzallo thought that professors had a duty and obligation to their country as employees of a governmental institution to be supportive of the war. For Suzzallo, it was necessary to curtail academic freedom in order to ensure that the war effort would continue to run smoothly. It seems, then, that he already believed Professor Meisnest had not fully upheld his obligations to the University—perhaps he had already made up his mind how he was going to handle the situation. At any rate, the matter would still be investigated by War Emergency Committee.

On July 18th, the committee met in President Suzzallo's office to discuss the case, and on July 19th, it sent a report of its findings to the President. Since the University was in the middle of the summer session, not all members of the committee were available to voice their opinions on the matter—in all, only nine of the twenty-two members were available for the investigation. They reached a unanimous agreement on all points of the report sent to President Suzzallo, which included both general principles for the conduct of teachers, as well as their findings in reference to the specific attitude and conduct of Professor Meisnest. The committee found that although the evidence collected did not show any treasonable intent on the part of Meisnest, it found that, "interpreted in the light of the previous public utterances of Professor Meisnest, . . . the lecture of June 26th [sic] was in bad taste, was ill considered and that its delivery constitutes a serious indiscretion."³³ The previous public utterances they were referring to were articles published in February from both the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the *University of Washington Daily*, in which Professor Meisnest expressed his opinion that war between the United States and Germany would not occur, nor would it be defensible for America to wage war with Germany.³⁴

³³ "Report of the War Emergency Committee – to President Suzzallo – July 19, 1917," Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

³⁴ "Says Americans Do Not Think War Cause Exists," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 4, 1917, p.10 ; "War With Kaiser Not Defensible," *University of Washington Daily*, February 6, 1917, p.1.

Such an attitude toward the European War was not, however, uncommon in February of 1917, as many other members of the public and professors at the University were of similar opinions in opposition to the war. One must keep in mind that at this time, neutral or anti-war positions were very common in America. Nonetheless, it appears that the comments made by Meisnest before the American entry into World War I were still used by the committee as evidence against him.

It is quite important to point out that a few weeks after Meisnest's interviews appeared in the newspapers, but still before America entered the war, Professor H.G. Byers voiced his opinion that Germany was an aggressive power that would "go to any length to gain her end by fair or foul means."³⁵ He argued that the United States could not avoid declaring war and that the people of the United States should back President Wilson to the fullest extent. Therefore, Byers, clearly an ardent supporter of the war, was probably already biased in his opinions about Meisnest (who had expressed his desire that the United States stay out of the war) when the War Emergency Committee—of which he was chairman—made its investigation and drew its conclusions.

During the time of the investigation, most of the public seemed to have already forgotten about the lecture and all the controversy surrounding it. This is indicated by the fact that no paper mentioned anything about the case from the first week of July until mid-August. In fact, a number of articles printed in mid-July in *The University Journal* cover an event held at Professor Meisnest's summer home, but no mention about the lecture is made in any of them: on July 20th, the newspaper reported that "[t]he German club will picnic tomorrow at 'Lemola,' the summer home of Dr. F. W. Meisnest, head of the German department . . . German games and songs will be one of the items on the amusement menu."³⁶ This article suggests that the students at the

³⁵ "War Only Course Say Faculty Men," *University of Washington Daily*, March 1, 1917, p. 1.

³⁶ "German Club to Picnic with Meisnest Saturday," *The University Journal*, July 20, 1917, p. 2.

University were not concerned about Professor Meisnest's conduct, and that German culture was still accepted by many. If anti-Germanism had already taken over the student population, then this and similar articles would not have been printed.

Unfortunately for Meisnest, it was not *The University Journal* that would determine his fate. Unbeknownst to him, on July 20th, the day before he hosted the picnic for the German club, the Board of Regents met with President Suzzallo and came to a decision regarding Professor Meisnest's actions. After discussing the case, Suzzallo recommended to the regents that Meisnest be relieved as administrative head of the department of German. The regents responded in the following way:

The adoption of the recommendation was moved by Regent Fechter, seconded by Regent Rea, and carried by the following vote: Ayes: Regents Fechter, Rea, Shannon, Miller, Wheeler, Perkins and McKee. Nays, none. Regents Perkins and McKee, while voting Aye, desired to be recorded as favoring the dismissal of Dr. Meisnest from the faculty.³⁷

It is important to highlight the fact that although the regents were unanimous in their decision to demote Meisnest, some believed he should be punished more severely. Considering the evidence provided by Byers and the War Emergency Committee, it is somewhat shocking that some members of the University's decision-making body were of the opinion that Meisnest should be fired altogether. It seems that perhaps they were persuaded that Meisnest posed a serious threat to the war effort, as his constant contact with students could possibly dissuade others from supporting the war.

On July 23rd, President Suzzallo sent Professor Meisnest a letter informing him of the regents' decision. It was explained to Meisnest that he was being demoted because "both the President and the Board of Regents no longer have confidence in your ability to administer and

³⁷ Minutes of the Board of Regents, July 20, 1917, Box 20/8, W.U. Regents Records, Acc. 78-103, UWL.

execute the public policies of this University, as related to the Department of German, with that sound judgment, good taste and discretion required during the existing crisis.”³⁸ It is without any doubt that President Suzzallo and the Board of Regents believed that Meisnest did not set the correct example for a university professor. The President and the Board of Regents felt that his conduct was detrimental to the University of Washington as a whole, and by extension, to the United States of America, for his actions were deemed to hinder the war effort. Thus, they believed they were doing their duty by demoting him.

But it also seems that some injustice was done to Meisnest. Frederick E. Bolton, the director and dean of the summer school in 1917, who in January had asked Meisnest to give a lecture in the summer and who introduced him on that fateful night of June 25, 1917, wrote in his unpublished “History of the University of Washington” that Meisnest was patriotic, did nothing wrong in his speech, and was loyal to his country:

Assurance was given to President Suzzallo that Dr. Meisnest had said absolutely nothing that should be construed as disloyal. He had stated nothing that was not to be found in many standard texts on social amelioration and crime. . . . As a college roommate and life-long professional acquaintance and friend of Dr. Meisnest, this writer is confident that Dr. Meisnest was and is an absolutely loyal patriot. Under the stress of war we know how people were so incited as to burn German books and honestly regard anything or anyone connected with German as belonging to an enemy. It was an unfortunate combination of factors: he has a German name; was professor of German; was lecturing about the Germans; and was commending some of their social and economic measures.³⁹

³⁸ President Suzzallo to Professor Frederick W. Meisnest, July 23, 1917, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

³⁹ Frederick E. Bolton, *History of the University of Washington*, unpublished manuscript, pp. 35-37, Box 14/Chapters 14-16, Frederick E. Bolton Papers, Acc. 194-70-1, UWL.

Here we have a Dean of the University who personally attended the lecture, and yet he saw nothing wrong with it. But he conceded that in the climate of the time, too many factors were against Meisnest which led to some of the public branding him as unpatriotic. Had the speech been given six months earlier, there would have been absolutely no uproar about it. One must admit, as Meisnest did soon after the lecture, that he had lacked discretion. Given the fact that the United States was at war with Germany, it would have been wiser had he not given so much praise to Germany's past. But when Meisnest went before the committees mentioned above and was asked to clarify his lecture, his arguments as to the content and purpose of his speech suggest his loyalty: it seems as if he truly meant for his lecture to help America by making her more prepared for her enemy. This tends to suggest, therefore, that Dean Bolton was correct in his statement above that "Dr. Meisnest was and is an absolute patriot."

Meisnest was demoted for his single act of indiscretion because he had not lived up to the war-inflamed expectations of society. Anti-German hysteria was growing more prevalent in Seattle, and when Meisnest praised Germany and its institutions in his lecture, the public naturally suspected him of disloyalty. It did not matter what his true motives were, patriotic though they might have been, for he gave the impression that he was pro-German to the ignorant nativist. As a government employee, university officials expected him to be a strong supporter of the war. As a teacher of youth, the public demanded that he not exert pro-German influence on his students. But when Meisnest made his indiscreet comments, it appeared that he was acting disloyally, and he thus had to be punished. With his demotion, the damage against Meisnest would for the moment seem to be complete, but we shall later see that the sorry times for him were only taking a half-year hiatus.

Before we reach that point in time, however, it is first necessary to look at the events that took place in the Seattle Public Schools beginning in December of 1917. Here, just like at the University of Washington, a number of teachers of German descent were discriminated against, and in fact, anti-Germanism would prove to be a bit more prevalent at the Seattle Public Schools than at the University. This may be attributed, perhaps, to a greater fear of the influence of pro-Germanism on high school students, who are younger, and therefore more vulnerable, than college students. Historian Albert F. Gunns notes that suspicions of teachers of the German language were high because it was “feared that students were in danger of being subjected to subtle pro-‘Hun’ propaganda” by these teachers.⁴⁰ Such a fear certainly seems reasonable, as teachers have much influence on shaping the minds, beliefs, and opinions of their students. Therefore, the adult population of Seattle concluded that the ensuing investigations of the teachers of the German language were completely necessary in order to ensure that their youth were taught to be proper, patriotic individuals.

The greater prevalence of anti-Germanism in the high schools can also be attributed to the work of a volunteer civilian group called the “Minute Men.” Soon after the United States entered World War I, two Seattle men, S. J. Lombard and W. A. Blackwood, formed this organization, ostensibly to help alleviate the increased workload of the agencies of the federal government.⁴¹ In reality, however, the Minute Men were basically a group of nativist vigilantes, and they would not become absorbed into the American Protective League (A.P.L.)—a nationwide patriotic organization with a quasi-governmental status as an auxiliary of the United States Department of Justice—until well after they had done most of their work meddling in “patriotic” affairs.

⁴⁰ Albert F. Gunns, *Civil Liberties in Crisis* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

The Minute Men were a collection of ordinary citizens who would essentially become amateur investigators, spying on the activities of their neighbors, friends, colleagues, and others. Members came from a wide range of professions, such as policemen, salesmen, engineers, builders, laborers, dentists, and even a few professors at the University of Washington who kept an eye on their coworkers and students.⁴² Eventually, the organization expanded so that twenty-nine of Washington's thirty-nine counties had branches of the Minute Men. Although they did not become officially recognized and accepted as a government agency until June 12, 1918, the Minute Men nonetheless had much support from both the public and government. Leading civic figures, such as Judge Thomas Burke and lumberman Edwin G. Ames, as well as local governmental officials, including Clarence L. Reames, Special Assistant to the United States Attorney General, Clay Allen, United States Attorney for Washington, Henry M. White, Commissioner of Immigration, and John Speed Smith, Chief Naturalization Examiner at Seattle, all gave their backing to the Minute Men.⁴³

Calling themselves "The Men Behind the Government," the Minute Men described their duty as "suppressing sedition and treason and efforts to embarrass the government in the prosecution of our present war."⁴⁴ Their main preoccupation was in maintaining a productive war effort by "focusing their attention on draft dodgers, the Wobblies, and any other labor groups considered radical."⁴⁵ But these were certainly not their only activities: by December of

⁴² For the list of members from Precinct 1 of the Seattle Minute Men, see: "Membership of the Minute Men, Precinct 1," Box 1 /2, APL: Minute Men, Precinct 1 Records, Acc. 4288, UWL.

⁴³ Gunns, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bryce E. Nelson, *Good Schools: The Seattle Public School System, 1901-1930* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 117.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The Wobblies were members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a radical labor organization that was vehemently against the war (the organization promoted pacifism), and organized numerous strikes, including a lumber strike that posed a major threat to the war effort if the I.W.W. was not sufficiently suppressed. From 1917 to 1918, the Seattle Minute Men broke up many I.W.W. meetings, and acted as a "vigilante force working for the mayor": they arrested hundreds of I.W.W. members and put many of them in jail. See also Joan M. Jensen, *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1968), pp. 126-128.

1917, the Minute Men had begun conducting inquiries into the loyalty and patriotism of teachers of the German language, and, as we shall see later, they would also be very much behind the effort to eliminate the teaching of German in Seattle's high schools.

The first such teacher to come under suspicion of disloyalty was Professor H. F. W. Kilian, the head instructor of German at Broadway High School in Seattle. On December 14, 1917, a communication was sent by Charles Petrovitsky, acting director of the United States Department of Justice at Seattle, to the Seattle School Board, "complaining of the pro-German proclivities of H.F.W. Killian. . . ."⁴⁶ The original charges against Kilian apparently grew out of an incident at the meeting of the High School Men Teachers' Club earlier in December. At the meeting, Kilian took issue with a statement made by a Captain R. Hilton, a British officer who was a guest at the club, about atrocities committed by German soldiers in Europe.⁴⁷ He objected to what he saw as pro-British propaganda which misrepresented the German people. Kilian reportedly said in response that "he would trust a German officer as soon as he would an English or American officer; that if German soldiers did what people claimed, they would be shot for the offense. . . ."⁴⁸ But in a wartime climate, such neutrality was not tolerated by others, and brought claims of disloyalty against him. It would not be absurd to speculate, as historian Bryce E. Nelson does, that the Minute Men were probably the first to question the loyalty of Mr. Kilian, but we will likely never know for sure who alerted Petrovitsky.⁴⁹ At any rate, the complaints made about the teacher's behavior were taken quite seriously, and the Seattle School Board referred the case to Superintendent Frank B. Cooper.

⁴⁶ Seattle School Board Minutes, December 14, 1917, Seattle Public Schools Archives (hereafter cited as SPS).

⁴⁷ "Broadway German Teacher to be Put on Grill," *The Seattle Times*, December 27, 1917, p.4.

⁴⁸ "Instructor in German to be Given Hearing," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 27, 1917, p. 1.

⁴⁹ See Nelson, p. 118.

Superintendent Cooper spent the next week looking into the matter, trying to assess whether or not Mr. Kilian was indeed pro-German in sentiment or not. After “having investigated the matter very thoroughly” (according to him), Cooper submitted his report to the Seattle School Board on December 24, 1917.⁵⁰ He remarked that Kilian seemed to be somewhat sympathetic with the Germans and “that he feels like defending the German people, although he does not enforce the German government.”⁵¹ Kilian had clearly not been able to cut all ties with Germany as the American public expected of him and other German-Americans. When Captain Hilton described the horrible atrocities German soldiers had allegedly committed in Europe at the meeting of the High School Men Teachers’ Club, Kilian felt compelled to come to the defense of the German soldier. He did not have the forethought to remain quiet, but instead spoke up and made indiscreet statements in support of Germans. His statements were interpreted by persons present at the meeting as disloyal, and thus charges of disloyalty were made against him.

In addition, the superintendent mentioned to the School Board that he had already taken up the question of Mr. Kilian’s pro-Germanism before any charges were formally made against him. In an interview with the teacher on December 7th, Cooper told Kilian that he should focus entirely on the teaching of the German language and not discuss anything more about the war. Cooper wrote that as far as he could learn, Kilian had “acted in accordance with that direction. Prior to that interview, there is no doubt about his having been very indiscreet in his utterances.”⁵² The fact that Cooper mentioned Kilian’s prior misbehavior suggests that he still feared that Kilian had not completely changed his position towards the war, and that he might make pro-German comments in his classes again.

⁵⁰ “Instructor in German to be Given Hearing,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 27, 1917, p. 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

After Cooper read his report to the board, School Director Nathan Eckstein asked the superintendent whether or not he believed Killian was pro-German, but Cooper replied that he was not sure based upon the evidence he had gathered. At this point, School Director Anna Louise Strong—who was herself under suspicion of disloyalty as a socialist and opponent of the war—was “inclined to accept Professor Kilian’s explanations and there was a disposition on the part of board members to reprimand Professor Kilian and dispose of the incident.”⁵³ Thus, it seemed like the case might be over, and Kilian would be allowed to continue his work as a teacher of German.

But before the meeting adjourned, one of the other members of the board (of a total of five), School Director George A. Spencer, was not prepared to let Kilian get off as easily as Director Strong proposed. Instead, he “demanded a full investigation and more drastic action if Kilian’s pro-Germanism were proved.”⁵⁴ The majority of the board changed its mind, deciding to accept Director Spencer’s position, and a subcommittee was created to investigate the case further. This special subcommittee consisted of two members of the School Board—President Ebenezer Shorrock (an immigrant banker from England) and Director Spencer, both of whom were very supportive of the war—in addition to Superintendent Cooper.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that the composition of this subcommittee did not include either of the more pacifist members of the School Board, Director Strong and Director Richard Winsor (a Socialist judge). One may speculate whether, if a more balanced subcommittee had been formed, Kilian would have been let off with a lesser punishment than the one he would receive.

On December 28, Kilian went before the subcommittee for a hearing, in which he explained his actions and public utterances. Only one day after this meeting, the subcommittee

⁵³ “Broadway German Teacher to be Put on Grill,” *The Seattle Times*, December 27, 1917, p.4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Nelson, p. 108

wrote up their final report, and delivered it at a special meeting of the Board of Directors on December 29. It is unclear how much more evidence the special committee was able to gather in addition to the work already done by Superintendent Cooper, but it does not seem like anything new was found. Based on a letter which Kilian sent to Cooper, the subcommittee understood Kilian's position to be that "the acts of Germany were not acts of war against the United States, as claimed by the President; . . . therefore, the United States was not justified in entering the war. . . . [A]t best, Mr. Kilian considered both sides equally to blame, in contrast with the declarations of the President."⁵⁶ This indicates that the subcommittee believed that such neutrality in regards to the war was simply unacceptable, for it did not create a good example of patriotism for Kilian's students to follow. Furthermore, the subcommittee pointed out that "Mr. Kilian apparently failed to appreciate the fact that the School Code provides that a teacher must teach patriotism, and the rights and duties of American citizens, and that on the contrary, his attitude and utterances have been condemnatory as to the United States, and apologetic as to Germany."⁵⁷

The subcommittee clearly believed that Kilian had not been following his duty as a patriotic teacher. Instead, the subcommittee members had an underlying fear that if patriotism was not instilled in his classrooms, his students might adopt the same neutral ideology and beliefs as him. Although they believed Kilian would honestly try to avoid unpatriotic statements in the future, the members of the subcommittee could not, however, "avoid the conclusion that his views have not changed, and that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for him to conceal where his sympathies lie." They believed that Kilian could not completely change his position and cut all ties with Germany. In addition, they argued that the public "rightly demands that there shall be no suspicion of it in the schools. Your Committee holds the same view. What

⁵⁶ Seattle School Board Minutes, December 29, 1917, SPS.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

could be tolerated in the ordinary avocations of life cannot be tolerated in an instructor of the young.”⁵⁸ This quote underscores that the subcommittee members would not allow any form of disloyalty among teachers of the young, due to vulnerability of the latter. Because of this fear, the subcommittee recommended to demand Kilian’s resignation. It should come as no shock that Directors Shorrock and Spencer voted in favor of adopting the report which they composed. But with Director Strong opposing and Director Winsor absent, it required the vote of Director Eckstein, another ardent supporter of the war and patriotism, to pass. With their decision set in stone, Kilian had no choice but to tender his resignation later that week. The resignation was accepted unanimously by the School Board on January 4, 1918, and would officially take effect on January 25, until which time Kilian was given a leave of absence.⁵⁹

Professor Kilian lost his job because he claimed neutrality at a time when complete patriotism was demanded, among other reasons. Like Professor Meisnest, Kilian lacked the necessary discretion given the hysterical climate. He found it impossible to ignore all his past connections with Germany. He could not jump onto the anti-German bandwagon, but rather felt compelled to come to the defense of Germans after nativists attacked the morality of the German soldier. In doing so, he incited much public indignation, and created a fear that he might influence his students with his beliefs. Kilian did not seem to appreciate the fact that the Seattle public was not going to accept anything less than full support of the war, and as a result, he was branded with the iron of disloyalty and lost his job.

It is unclear to what extent the Seattle Minute Men played a role in the Kilian case. What is certain, however, is that the ruling of the Seattle School Board opened up the avenue by which the Minute Men and others could go after other supposedly disloyal teachers. Evidence suggests

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Seattle School Board Minutes, January 4, 1918, SPS.

that numerous teachers of German descent in the Seattle Public Schools (who were mainly teachers of the German language) were investigated by the Minute Men, even if there was no indication that a given teacher was remotely unpatriotic. Mrs. LeRoy Backus, the former head of Modern Languages at the Broadway High School, was investigated by the Minute Men because she was the sister of a former professor of German at the University of Washington and because she supported Kilian during his case.⁶⁰ The latter action should not have been considered that suspicious, given the fact that Mr. Kilian and Mrs. Backus were co-workers in the same department at the Broadway High School and were most likely on amicable terms—it seems perfectly normal that a person would come to a friend or colleague’s defense in such an instance. Nonetheless, she was put under the scrupulous eye of the Minute Men, merely for her social connections and family ties.

It is unknown what happened as a result of the investigations carried out against Mrs. Backus, but it would not come as a shock if she too were fired for such a trivial thing as guilt by association. Had accusations of disloyalty been made public, her reputation as a teacher would have been so greatly tarnished that she almost certainly could not continue as a fully respected teacher. Historian Bryce E. Nelson writes that the “validity of the charges against the teachers became a secondary consideration. Indeed, the fact that charges were brought was sufficient to taint a teacher so that the teacher was considered incapable of exerting a positive influence on students.”⁶¹ Since the ruling from the Kilian case demanded that there be absolutely no suspicion of disloyalty or even neutrality among teachers, and because the School Code required for teachers to teach patriotism, merely being charged with disloyalty would probably have resulted in her dismissal from the Seattle Public Schools.

⁶⁰ “Subject: Mrs. LeRoy Backus,” report of the American Protective League, The Minute Men Division, Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

⁶¹ Nelson, p. 119.

Unfortunately, suspicions of disloyalty about seemingly harmless teachers like Mrs. Backus appear to have been typical of the Minute Men and other members of the public. In addition, most of the investigations carried out by the Minute Men seem to have been unfair, unprofessional, and possibly illegal. Much of their work was “frivolous at best and at the worst constituted shocking violations of privacy and principles of fair play.” In addition, the “evidence” they collected was often made up of “grotesque compendiums of professional antagonisms, half-truths, guilt by association, guilt by omission, and otherwise incompetent testimony.”⁶² In short, their work was anything but reliable or professional.

Nevertheless, the work of the Minute Men must have influenced the officials of the Seattle Public Schools, for at least six teachers were fired. Furthermore, the public seems to have accepted the firings as necessary and good for the schools. The Kilian case was well covered in both the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, but no editorials were written denouncing the investigation or the final outcome of it. Rather, the case’s extensive coverage indicates that the public was quite interested in it and approved of the decision made by the Seattle School Board.⁶³ Judge Thomas Burke, a strong supporter of the Minute Men, expressed the following opinion about teachers of the German language during the summer of 1918:

It has been notorious for sometime that the German language departments of the secondary schools throughout the state have been nests of German propaganda. Up to the last year even the University of Washington was not exempt from the same evil

⁶² Gunns, pp. 15-16.

⁶³ It should be noted, however, that the *Seattle German Press*’s coverage of the case seems to hint that some German-Americans did not agree with Mr. Kilian’s firing. This observation is based on the paper’s subtitle for the article published about Mr. Kilian’s resignation: “Teacher of the German language loses his job because he defends the morality of the German soldier.” This suggests that the editor of the newspaper did not agree that Mr. Kilian’s public utterances and demeanor in the classroom were unpatriotic, and therefore his firing was unjust. See “Kilian Resigns,” *Seattle German Press*, January 6, 1918, p. 4.

influence, but happily now in that institution the vipers have been cleaned out and the University thoroughly disinfected of German poison gas in all its various forms. Much remains to be done to clean out the high schools.⁶⁴

Such a negative opinion of teachers of the German language seems to have been a common view among Seattleites in 1917-18. Yet it is still somewhat amazing that anyone could come to the conclusion that pro-German propaganda was rampant in German language departments across the state without pointing to any solid evidence to back up such fears. One must take into account, however, the great wave of anti-German hysteria that swept across Seattle during this period. The war atmosphere rapidly heightened the public's fear about the possible danger German teachers posed to society, as many Seattle adults were concerned about the influence pro-Germanism, if present in the schools, would have on the youth of America. Such fears became so great that public institutions were put under intense pressure to ensure that absolutely no risks were taken, even with people as innocuous as Meisnest and Kilian.

Against the German Language

During the same time as the Kilian case, another form of anti-German agitation roared to life in Seattle. Building upon the growing discontent toward things German, which had recently intensified because of the growing suspicion of disloyalty of German teachers, a strong movement developed against the teaching of the German language. Just as German teachers were suspected of influencing their students with pro-German propaganda in their classes, the exact same fears were broadened to the entire discipline of the teaching of German. Patriotic citizens were supposedly weary of the "potential perversion of America's youth by German-language instruction in the schools and by German-language textbooks and library books. How could a child learn to hate the Kaiser, as proper patriotism required, when he was daily

⁶⁴ Thomas Burke to unknown, July 20, 1918, Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

confronted with laudatory references to him, his people, and their language and culture?”⁶⁵ As part of a nationwide movement during the winter of 1917-18, therefore, the teaching of the German language in Seattle became the target of strong attacks by the nativists of the city, led in part by the Seattle Minute Men.

One such nativist was a Seattle attorney by the name of John W. Roberts, a man who had very strong ties to the Minute Men, if he was not himself a full member.⁶⁶ After paying close attention to the investigation of Professor Kilian and the subsequent decision to demand his resignation, Mr. Roberts sent a letter to the Seattle School Board on December 31, 1917 commending the members for their action. In addition, he took the opportunity to voice his opinion that the German language should not be taught in the public schools: “as a tax payer, I protest the disbursement of any further school funds to promote the German language or German literature in our public schools.”⁶⁷ Mr. Roberts’ protest made its way into Seattle’s newspapers, and as such, the public became aware of the issue. The German-American community was naturally upset with the proposal, and in an editorial published on January 6, 1918, the *Seattle German Press* argued against it. The article pointed out that neglecting the study of German would do nothing to hinder the military power of Germany and her allies, but rather Americans would be the “sufferers from this queer manifestation of war hysteria.”⁶⁸

The School Board decided to refer the matter to Superintendent Cooper, who then submitted a report about Mr. Robert’s protest on January 7, 1918. In the report, Cooper defended the continuation of the teaching of the German language. He pointed out that German

⁶⁵ Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), pp. 250-251.

⁶⁶ This is indicated by the large number of reports of the Seattle Minute Men which document Mr. Roberts’ letters attacking the teaching of the German language. See: Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

⁶⁷ John W. Roberts to Mr. E. Shorrock, President of the School Board, December 31, 1917, Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

⁶⁸ “German in the Schools,” *Seattle German Press*, January 6, 1918, p.8 (in English).

was still a requirement for entrance into certain university courses and that the language was very valuable due to the vast amount of scientific literature written in German. Cooper therefore believed that there were valid cultural, educational, and commercial reasons for the continuation of the teaching of German. He did, however, concede the following:

If instruction in German in the schools were likely to be made the vehicle of pro-Germanism or were liable to be promotive of a pro-Germanic feeling among our youth, I would unhesitatingly condemn its use. . . . I am aware that the aversion to and detestation of things German may carry us to unreasonable and reactionary limits. If the time comes that public heat against the German language becomes at all intense, it would be better to drop it because of the unnatural fever, but for no other reason.⁶⁹

Thus, Cooper also feared the negative influence pro-Germanism could have on students, and recognized the growing hatred of things German among the Seattle public. Yet he saw no real justification for dropping German—except if the hysteria against the teaching of German became unreasonable. This indicates, in effect, that he was already preparing to bow to public pressure, regardless of the merits of upholding the instruction of German.

At this time, however, Cooper was not convinced that pro-Germanism was active in the schools and did not believe that agitation against the German language was very strong. As such, he recommended that the teaching of German be continued. His report was met with praise from Seattle's German-American community, indicated by this response from the *Seattle German Press*: "It is to be greeted with relief that Superintendent Cooper has recommended to

⁶⁹ Frank B. Cooper to the Board of Directors, January 7, 1918, Folder: Foreign Language 1917-18, Frank Cooper Papers, Acc. A-1978-15 #12, SPS.

the School Board to keep German instruction. It appears that the horrible hysteria is slowly dying out and that true patriotism is taking its place.”⁷⁰

Unfortunately, this “horrible hysteria” was only starting to heat up. Some members of the public certainly did not agree with Superintendent Cooper’s defense, and further protests from John W. Roberts and others soon came in to the Seattle School Board. Roberts did not find the superintendent’s arguments convincing, and wrote that he believed “a majority of the tax payers are equally unconvinced. In fact, since the papers made public that I had written you on the subject, I have discovered that the sentiment against the teaching of German in the High School is much stronger than I realized when I wrote the former letter merely voicing my personal convictions.”⁷¹ Roberts was particularly annoyed that the German language still was being taught at a time when the U.S. Government was asking for people to dispense with all non-essentials. He continued:

I have been wondering why I should go without bacon as I have for the last six months, while contributing money towards the teaching of German, which is certainly non-essential, if not un-patriotic, at this time. We have just awakened, to the fact . . . that one of the avenues through which Germany most successfully spreads her propaganda in this country, has been the teaching of her language in the public schools.⁷²

Roberts was not only convinced that pro-Germanism was present in the public schools, but he also believed that the mere teaching of German was unpatriotic. As such, he desired for the youth of Seattle to not be subjected to the unpatriotic language or influenced by its disloyal teachers.

⁷⁰ “German in the Schools,” *Seattle German Press*, January 9, 1918, p. 4.

⁷¹ John W. Roberts to the Board of Directors, Seattle Public Schools, January 15, 1918, Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Less than a week later, a lawyer named Harry Ballinger sent a similar letter to the School Board protesting against the teaching of German in the High Schools. He suggested that German should be dropped for three reasons. Two of them were along the same lines of Mr. Roberts's arguments, suggesting that there was a general public fear that German propaganda was at work in the schools through the use of pro-German texts and via the disloyal German instructors. Ballinger argued that the subject should be dropped until books for German instruction could be provided which were completely free of propaganda, and until a thoroughly loyal group of German instructors could be procured. He also put forth a new argument, one which may explain why enrollment in German dropped rapidly in the Seattle Schools:

There is a feeling among our people, and justly so, a feeling of bitterness against Germany and German institutions. Many people will not desire German to be taught, either because of their own prejudice against that people or because the prejudices of others might cause them to be suspected of disloyal tendencies [if] they encourage their children to pursue this study.⁷³

This statement indicates that hatred of the German language was already very high in Seattle. It also suggests that many parents were now arguing to drop the language out of fear of being labeled disloyal if they did not dissuade their children from taking German.

In addition to Mr. Roberts and Mr. Ballinger, another group protested the continuation of German as a subject taught in the schools. Camp No. 2 of the United Spanish-American War Veterans, an organization which included a number of members who were Minute Men as well, wrote to the Seattle School Board on January 25, 1918 that they felt the teaching of German

⁷³ Harry Ballinger to the School Board, January 19, 1918, School Board Correspondence, Folder: "World War I and the Seattle Schools, 1917-18," no Accession, SPS.

should “be discontinued for the present, at least, if not for all time.”⁷⁴ They also included a resolution they passed on the previous day: “[German] departments have been used as agencies for the spreading of pro-German propaganda . . . now therefore be it resolved by George H. Fortson Camp No. 2 . . . that we condemn the teaching of German at this time as unpatriotic, and an unnecessary expenditure of public funds.”⁷⁵ A couple of weeks later, another group of the United Spanish-American War Veterans, Carl M. Thygesen Camp No. 11, sent in its own letter to the School Board, reporting that it had “voted unanimously in favor of a resolution condemning the teaching of the German language in the schools of Seattle. The general opinion of the members at the present time is that said teaching ‘is not only unwise, but dangerous.’”⁷⁶

Such a relatively large number of written protests suggests, therefore, that John W. Roberts was correct in his assertion that the public sentiment against the teaching of German in high school was very high. But perhaps the greatest indicator of the hysteria against the teaching of German can be found in the dwindling German class sizes in both the Seattle Public Schools and at the University of Washington.

As the agitation against German became stronger and stronger, and as the protests became ever more frequent, it seems many students simply decided to disassociate themselves completely with the now hated language. Others were probably persuaded by family, friends, and others to stop taking the language, lest the students or the students’ families be accused of disloyalty, as Harry Ballinger argued would happen. At any rate, enrollment dropped dramatically: a report by Superintendent Cooper (published probably in February or March) showed that the number of students studying German in the Seattle Public Schools had dwindled

⁷⁴ Camp No. 2 of United Spanish War Veterans to the School Board, January 25, 1918, School Board Correspondence, Folder: “World War I and the Seattle Schools, 1917-18,” no Accession, SPS.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “February 6, 1918 – Carl M. Thygesen Camp No. 11 United Spanish-American War Veterans,” School Board Correspondence, Folder: “World War I and the Seattle Schools, 1917-18,” no Accession, SPS.

from 800 before the war to 300 at the present. This was published in an undated article from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which was then quoted in a report of the Seattle Minute Men, and concluded that “[r]egardless of official sentiment on the subject, it was apparent that the pupils would not include German in their course of study.”⁷⁷

At the University of Washington, formal protests to drop German from the University curriculum seem to have not occurred. This may be attributed, perhaps, to a lesser fear of the influence of pro-Germanism on older college students versus high school youth. President Suzzallo made clear in a letter to the chancellor of the University of Montana back in November of 1917 that the administrators at the University of Washington had “no intention whatever of getting rid of the German department.”⁷⁸ He admitted, however, that there wasn’t “a demand for German adequate to utilize the entire staff that we [have].” As a consequence, President Suzzallo predicted he would have to transfer some of the German professors to other departments where they were equally learned, as well as probably dropping his most recent appointment to the department. He clearly did not foresee, however, how great the drop of the demand for German would be. Already by January of 1918, registration in the German department had sharply declined, with a “38% reduction in the teaching load in the German Department. The increase in the French Department has been almost as great, being 33%.”⁷⁹ Thus, just like the high school students of Seattle, college students at the University of Washington began to boycott the German language by no longer enrolling in German classes.

⁷⁷ “Subject: Frank B. Cooper,” report of the American Protective League, The Minute Men Division, Box: 33/7, Thomas Burke Papers, Acc. 1483-2, UWL.

⁷⁸ Henry Suzzallo to Chancellor E.C. Elliot, November 27, 1917, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

⁷⁹ Executive Secretary to Mr. A.C. Roberts, Superintendent, Everett Public Schools, January 5, 1918, Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

During the next few months, the protests against the German language would continue with unrelenting force in Seattle. In the midst of all the hysteria, Anna Louise Strong, one of the Board of Directors of the Seattle School Board, was recalled from her position by a city-wide vote for her supposedly unpatriotic behavior and for her anti-war stance.⁸⁰ Thus, the one strong supporter of the teaching of German had been ousted from the School Board. With all the controversy surrounding the study of German (including the charges of disloyalty against German teachers, the fear of pro-German propaganda being subtly taught by such teachers and being present in the German texts themselves, and the decrease in students taking the language), further pressure was put upon Superintendent Cooper and the Seattle School Board to drop the subject from the curriculum. Cooper eventually caved in to the pressure and on April 1, 1918 he recommended the discontinuation of the teaching of German. After referring to his previous report of January 7, in which he stated that German should only be dropped if the public agitation against it were to become too intense, Cooper offered another argument. He was now convinced that:

[t]here has been an organized attempt on the Prussian element in this country that has resisted complete Americanization, to foster and to promote the extension of German ideals and German influence in this country. I believe that any such course is subversive of true Americanism and a menace to our complete nationalization. As this organized attempt to impose Germanization includes necessarily the nurture and perpetuation of the German language in this country, I believe that the public school should deny a place in its curriculum for instruction in that language, and I am ready to recommend the

⁸⁰ See Nelson, pp. 120-123.

discontinuance of German as a subject of study in the Seattle high schools, following the close of the current school year.⁸¹

The banning of the teaching of German illustrates the force of public hysteria upon those with power. Superintendent Cooper never found any justification for dropping German, and yet at the outset, he was preparing to bow to public pressure—pressure which he admitted was irrational. Furthermore, there appears to be no truth to the claim that German language classes in the public schools were in any way subversive or part of a sinister plot against Americanization. Yet Cooper's chilling letter shows that he, too, had now submitted to the hysteria that had grappled the rest of Seattle, and saw it as his duty to bow to the demands of the public.

On April 8, the members of the School Board voted unanimously to discontinue the teaching of German in the Seattle Public Schools at the close of the present school year.⁸² It appears that the Seattle public reacted to the decision with relief and joy. This is indicated by the fact that the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* dedicated a front-page article with the headline "Speech of Hated Hun Forbidden." The reporter pointed out that based on a recent survey for the *Literary Digest*, responses from Seattle citizens showed that "no educational question is agitating the public mind like that concerning the teaching of German."⁸³ It seems plausible, then, to conclude that the public was overjoyed now that the hated language had been banned from the schools.

German was banned throughout the State of Washington in August of 1918. Under recommendation from the State Council of Defense (of which Henry Suzzallo was chairman), the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Washington declared that the teaching of

⁸¹ Frank B. Cooper to the Board of Directors, April 1, 1918, Folder: Foreign Language 1917-18, Frank Cooper Papers, Acc. A-1978-15 #12, SPS.

⁸² Seattle School Board Minutes, April 8, 1918, SPS.

⁸³ "Speech of Hated Hun Forbidden," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 9, 1918, p. 1.

German was now prohibited throughout the entire state in all elementary and high schools, both public and private.⁸⁴ Washington would join Delaware, Iowa, and Montana, and others, as states in America to ban the teaching of German.⁸⁵ Such events suggest that Seattle's experience with anti-Germanism in educational institutions was anything but exceptional.

Aftermath and Evaluation

The impact of the attacks against the teaching of the German language from 1917 to 1918 was enormous. We have seen how anti-German agitation became so great that the teaching of German was banned in the Seattle Public Schools. At the University of Washington, German was never officially banned. Nevertheless, students boycotted the language on their own, as enrollment in German dropped dramatically after the United States entry into the World War. During the 1916-1917 school year, approximately 2.64 percent of the entire student population at the University took German. By 1917-1918, only 1.74 percent of the student population enrolled in German, and by 1919 only 0.23 percent of students registered for German.⁸⁶ In other words, from 1917 to 1919, the number of students taking German at the University decreased by approximately ninety percent! Such a decrease is astounding and indicates the severity of the hysteria against the German language.

The German language was certainly not the only thing to suffer from the war hysteria. As a result of the banning of German in the Seattle Public Schools and the great decrease in enrollment in German at the University of Washington, many teachers of the German language lost their jobs and would not be able to teach again for many years, if ever again. After German was banned, some high school teachers in the Seattle Public Schools were able to teach other subjects in which they were also learned. But most were not so fortunate, and at least two more

⁸⁴ *Washington Public Documents: Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1917-1918*, vol. 1, pp. 51-53.

⁸⁵ Higham, p. 208.

⁸⁶ "German," Box 63/5, Henry Suzzallo Papers, Acc. 48-70-76, UWL.

instructors of German were let go in 1918.⁸⁷ Turning back to Professor Kilian, he too found life difficult after his firing in January of 1918, and would never be able to teach German again. Also unable to find a proper job, he spent the next few years building a new house with his wife and son before he mysteriously drowned in Puget Sound in November of 1920.⁸⁸

At the University of Washington, teachers of German found it equally unpleasant. Prior to the United States entry into World War I, the German faculty consisted of eight members.⁸⁹ In 1918, however, after noting great reduction in German classes, President Suzzallo and the Board of Regents found it necessary to decrease the size of the German faculty. They decided to dismiss three professors, allowing a fourth to take a leave of absence to help in the war effort. Professor Meisnest, who was removed as the head of the German department in July of 1917, was one of the three dismissed. In March and April of 1918, Meisnest's loyalty was once again called into question, and as a result of the controversy surrounding him, coupled with the need to cut down the size of the German faculty, his dismissal was an easy decision.⁹⁰

As registration in German continued to decrease, the need to reduce the size of the German faculty increased even further. Thus, by 1919, the German Department had dwindled down to only one professor, Assistant Professor E. O. Eckelman. For the next seven years, until 1926, Eckelman remained the only professor in the department, with graduate students helping out with a few classes here and there.⁹¹ It was during the 1926-27 school year that Professor Meisnest finally was allowed to return to the University, but only as a lecturer at a greatly reduced salary. Meisnest would remain at the rank of lecturer at least until the mid 1930s, at

⁸⁷ "August 5, 1918 – (after German had been announced as dropped)," School Board Correspondence, Folder: "World War I and the Seattle Schools, 1917-18," no Accession, SPS.

⁸⁸ "Discover Body of H. F. W. Kilian Near Tulalip," *Seattle Times*, November 14, 1920, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *University of Washington Catalogue*, 1916-17.

⁹⁰ See various letters in: Box 123/6, W.U. President Records, Acc. 71-34, UWL.

⁹¹ See various editions of the *University of Washington Catalogue*.

which time he was finally promoted. He ended his career as Professor Emeritus of German, regaining some prestige to a career that had been hampered by the anti-German agitation of World War I.⁹²

What is perhaps most striking is the length of time it took before German was once again accepted by the public. German was not taught again in the Seattle Public Schools until the 1926, a full eight years after German had been originally banned.⁹³ At the University of Washington, the Department of German (renamed the Department of Germanic Languages and Literature in 1918) did not remotely gain back any of its previous size until the 1929-30 academic year. During this school term, the department finally had three faculty members again (plus three graduate student associates) and offered a healthy number of graduate courses, five, for the first time since 1917-1918.⁹⁴ From 1919-1929, practically no graduate courses were offered, the only exceptions being the 1922-23 and 1927-28 academic years, when one graduate course was offered in each term. Such evidence indicates that the German Department at the University of Washington remained very small for a long period of time.

It is part of human nature to form biases and prejudices against that which we fear. We have seen that attacks were made against the German language and its teachers during World War I because the Seattle public feared that they might corrupt the minds of the youth with disloyalty. Unfortunately, this was only the first example in twentieth-century America in which a hysterical atmosphere produced a public fear which resulted in rampant discrimination against a group of people. During the Second World War, Japanese-Americans were first held in great suspicion by the American public and then deported almost entirely to internment camps, as the

⁹² Frederick E. Bolton, *History of the University of Washington*, unpublished manuscript, pp. 36-37, Box 14/Chapters 14-16, Frederick E. Bolton Papers, Acc. 194-70-1, UWL.

⁹³ Seattle Public Schools, School Directory, 1926-1927, SPS.

⁹⁴ Prior to 1918, approximately eight to ten graduate courses were offered each year. See various editions of the *University of Washington Catalogue*.

American public feared they were not completely loyal to the United States. The Cold War likewise saw Americans accuse their friends, neighbors, and colleagues as being communist, and therefore unpatriotic, fearing that ideals held by such people would ruin the American way of life.⁹⁵ It is unfortunate that the lessons of what happened half a century earlier to loyal Americans of German descent had not been heeded. Too often, it seems, truly loyal citizens were ostracized because of their background and beliefs, rather than for any provable disloyalty to America. Today, will we be a nation of understanding, which preserves the rights, liberties, and freedoms of all? Or will we once again discriminate against our fellow neighbors who we fear are disloyal to our country, simply because of their race or background?

⁹⁵ At the University of Washington, numerous professors were suspected of being communist and were investigated for disloyalty. See Gates, Chapter XIII.