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Charles Johanningsmeier

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World War I, Anti-German Hysteria, the “Spanish” Flu, and *My Ántonia*, 1917–1919

Charles Johanningsmeier | University of Nebraska at Omaha

At first glance, *My Ántonia* might seem to have nothing to do with World War I. Despite the fact that Cather’s fourth novel was written between the fall of 1916 and June 1918, the war is nowhere mentioned in it, and no evidence exists to suggest that Cather consciously intended to embed any type of commentary about the war within its pages. Nevertheless, *My Ántonia* is inextricably connected to the war, chiefly because its early sales and reception among American readers were very likely heavily influenced by the xenophobic attitudes that the war exacerbated.

Unlike Cather’s two previous plains novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), which had been relatively popular, *My Ántonia* was a disappointment in terms of sales, not only for its publisher, Houghton Mifflin, but also for Cather herself. Published on September 21, 1918, Cather’s novel had sold only 5,000 copies by December 5, and during its first two years in print, *My Ántonia* sold only 11,322 copies (Woodress 392). In a letter to her editor Ferris Greenslet dated May 19 [1919], Cather expressed her displeasure with these low sales figures and blamed them on what she regarded as Houghton Mifflin’s uninspired advertising (*Selected Letters* 274–277). Biographer James Woodress, on the other hand, later attributed the novel’s poor sales to its publication “at an unfortunate time. The country was preoccupied with the final days of World War I” (391). Both explanations contain an element of truth. Houghton Mifflin’s advertisements for *My Ántonia* were indeed lackluster, typically consisting of two short paragraphs of text that blandly promoted *Ántonia* as “aglow with vitality . . . all impulsive youth and careless courage,” and the novel itself as “a love story of profound human appeal” (Advertisement). The most enthusiasm the firm’s copywriters could muster for the book was the very qualified statement that “it is . . . one of the really

notable American novels of recent years.” In addition, the war, which would officially end on November 11, 1918, was on almost every American’s mind during the months when *My Ántonia* was first available. Yet *My Ántonia*’s lack of popularity among readers from 1918 to 1920 can also be attributed to two other factors: its generally positive portrayal of immigrants and what Jean Griffith has called the novel’s “critique” of the “carte blanche nativism” exhibited by the townspeople of Black Hawk (407).

American readers’ attitudes toward people who appeared “foreign” had changed a great deal since *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, with their Swedish heroines Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, had been published in June 1913 and October 1915, respectively. Granted, even in the decade before the war began in August 1914, anti-immigration sentiment had existed among those who felt that the millions of darker-skinned and supposedly germ-laden “aliens” from southern Italy, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe were threatening the country’s well-being. Once the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917, however,

large numbers of Americans became even more xenophobic than they had been before. Most of this distrust and anger was directed toward those of German heritage, but it also sometimes extended to other immigrants previously considered “good”: i.e., lighter-skinned, northern Europeans. According to historian John Higham, “the average non-German alien passed through 1917 and 1918 unscathed by hatred” (215); nonetheless, the “100% Americanism” movement fueled by the war definitely made all those labeled as “foreigners” slightly suspect in the minds of many old-stock Americans. As Mark Granquist notes, even “Scandinavian-American Lutherans, who still employed their immigrant languages and were often equally isolated from



World War I propaganda postcard; Bernhardt Wall, illustrator.



'English' society, were often lumped together with the German-Americans in the popular imagination." Higham, too, states that "the war created a more widespread concern than Americans had ever felt before over the immigrants' attachment to their adopted country" (213). To be regarded as truly "American" and escape censure, all foreign-born and first-generation Americans now understood that they needed to conspicuously display their 100% patriotism for the United States, its values, and its customs. Cultural productions that celebrated both immigrants' differences from Americans and elements of their native cultures would, one might imagine, have been viewed with much more suspicion than they had been previously. *My Antonia*, which conspicuously extols the virtues of the Bohemian Antonia, the Norwegian Lena Lingard, the Swede Tiny Soderball, the three Bohemian Marys, and the four Danish girls, would certainly fall into this category.

Also contributing heavily to many Americans' fears of "foreign contagion" was the catastrophic virus incorrectly dubbed the "Spanish flu," which, thanks to the war and its massive troop movements, swept throughout the world in 1918 and 1919. This pandemic, combined with the xenophobia fomented by the war, most definitely made September 1918 a very inauspicious time to release *My Antonia*, at least if one wanted it to sell well.

German aliens residing in the United States, as well as naturalized German-American citizens, had before the war been generally regarded quite positively. After the war began, however, they were viewed with increasing suspicion. The German torpedoing of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, resulting in the deaths of 128 Americans on board, a few isolated acts of German sabotage in the United States, and the famous Zimmermann telegram of January 1917 that revealed a plot to enlist Mexico as an ally of Germany, made most Americans extremely fearful of foreigners, even before the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917.



Berlin, Nebraska, ca. 1910. Suspicious fires destroyed much of main street in 1918. The town's name was changed to "Otoe" in October 1918, less than a month before Armistice Day.

After the United States had officially entered the war, this distrust spread rapidly. By the time the war ended in November 1918, about 250,000 German aliens and Americans of German ancestry had been put under surveillance by the U.S. government; approximately 6,300 of these—including German-language newspaper editors and symphony musicians—had been arrested and detained (Higham 210), with some 2,000 of these being incarcerated in prison camps at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and Fort Douglas, Utah (Kirschbaum 71–72).

Furthermore, in order to counter Germany's supposedly longstanding plan to infiltrate the country, a panoply of private and quasi-governmental organizations such as the American Defense Society, the American Protective League, and states' Councils of National Defense expended a great deal of effort in trying to eliminate all vestiges of German culture in the United States. As Erik Kirschbaum writes, from this point on, "Innocent activities in German clubs, churches, schools, and newspapers were regarded as part of an organized German propaganda effort to try to sweep the United States into the pan-German movement of the Kaiser and his government" (42).

One of the largest targets of the various "patriotic" groups trying to root out "foreign" influences was the German language. Across the country, learning, speaking, and reading German became highly suspect activities in the eyes of the non-German majority. The American Defense Society argued in a pamphlet entitled "Throw Out the German Language and All Disloyal Teachers" (January 1918): "We can make war on the Hun language, and we will. Any language which produces a people of ruthless conquistadors, such as now exists in Germany, is not fit to teach clean and pure American boys and girls, and the most ordinary principles of self-defense demand that it be eliminated" (quoted in Kirschbaum 103). Not surprisingly, the number of students enrolled in German language classes in schools dropped precipitously. A great number of state, county, city, and town governments actively moved to enact laws banning the speaking of German in public (Luebke 252), and in many rural communities it was not uncommon for people of German heritage to have their telephone party lines cut in order to keep them from communicating privately in German. Even as late as April 1919, the Nebraska State Legislature reflected the general anti-foreign sentiment in the state by passing what was known as the "Siman Act," which read in part, "No person, individually or as a teacher, shall, in any private, denominational, parochial or public school, teach any subject to any person in any language other than the English language" ("Meyer v. Nebraska").

While German was the language most conspicuously singled out by American "100 percenters," it was not the only



Gassed!

—another Victory for KULTUR

Drawn by
Louis Raemaekers
for The Century Magazine

Barron Collier Series of Patriotic Cartoons

World War I poster created for The Century Magazine. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

language under attack. Various states went further and forbade the speaking of any foreign language in public. In May 1918, the governor of Iowa, William L. Harding, issued a proclamation which “stated that English was the only language permitted in public in Iowa and that foreign languages were banned from all train cars, telephone conversations, public addresses, in public and private schools, and in churches” (Kirschbaum 125). The result was a very tense environment; as Kirschbaum states, “The laws against foreign-language use during that wartime frenzy were strictly enforced, and many ordinary Americans were eager to do their part to protect the nation’s security by informing authorities about people who violated the ban” (125).

Other signs of German “influence” besides the language itself were also actively rooted out. “Sauerkraut” was renamed “liberty cabbage,” and “Bismarck” pastries became “American beauties.” The names of countless streets, towns, schools, and businesses with German associations, such as “Berlin,” “Germantown,” or the “German National Bank” were officially changed. Statues and other monuments dedicated to Germans such as Friedrich Schiller were vandalized or removed (“From the Archives”; “The Schiller Linden Tree”). A great number of German-language newspapers and magazines were forced out of business by declining sales or had to begin publishing in English in order to avoid harassment by “patriotic” citizens and prosecution by the government (under provisions of the Espionage Act of June 1917, the Trading with the Enemy Act of October 1917, and the Sedition Act of May 1918). The American Protective League was especially active in intimidating German language newspapers, both by pouring symbolic yellow paint on their offices and by breaking into them and raiding or destroying their files. German books and newspapers were also removed from almost all public and high school libraries,

and frequently these were burned as part of patriotic rallies (Kirschbaum 99, 114, 135–136).

German music and musicians—many of them beloved by Cather—also came under attack. Numerous orchestra conductors and musicians with German backgrounds were dismissed; some were sent to internment camps. Throughout the country, music by German composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Mendelssohn, and Schubert were removed from programs (Luebke 248–49).

Kirschbaum reports, “In Pittsburgh, the city council issued a city-wide ban on all music by Beethoven. The Metropolitan Opera Company of New York forbade the production of German works; the Philadelphia Orchestra said it would stop performing all German music, beginning November 10, 1917” (132).

In a number of instances, the xenophobia took an even more aggressive and sometimes violent turn. Sadly, for instance, a great number of dachshunds and German shepherds, whether they belonged to Germans or not, were killed by superpatriots (Kirschbaum 119). German-Americans were often dragged out of their homes and forced to publicly kiss an American flag and/or recite a loyalty oath (Thompson 145). Many people with German surnames lost their jobs. In many communities, clergy members, usually those serving German Lutheran congregations, were actively intimidated in various ways. In July 1918, for example, Nebraska attorney general Willis H. Reed told one minister that, while there was not yet an actual law forbidding a minister from conducting church services in German, he felt that “by continuing the use of German in religious services and Sunday school the churches employing it are helping to discredit their own profession of loyalty” (“Discredit to Vocation”). In Eustis, Nebraska, the pastor of the German Church was arrested for preaching in German and “charged with violating the espionage act” (cited in Faber 98). Ministers were often threatened with physical violence if they didn’t stop preaching in German, and a great number of churches serving German-Americans and resident aliens were set on fire.

In addition, those who didn’t buy enough Liberty Bonds or pledge enough to the Red Cross—whether of German heritage or not—were frequently harassed and sometimes brought before ad hoc “slacker courts” for punishment. In Oakland, Nebraska, an affidavit was sworn out against Mr. Tom Kerl, who was alleged



to have protested about buying Liberty Bonds in November 1917, saying, within earshot of witnesses, that he thought it was ridiculous to buy war bonds that would pay for bullets that might be used to kill his German relatives (“Blood and Gore”). In April 1918, Rudolph Schopke, a banker who had lived and worked in Emerson, Nebraska, for 35 years, “was tarred and feathered and driven through the streets of the town because of alleged pro-German sympathies” (“Record for Buffalo”). This was not an isolated incident. At some point during the war, three men in Avoca, Nebraska, were also tarred and feathered; one even had a noose placed around his neck, and it was taken off only after he “promised to be good and contribute to the Red Cross or anything else they wanted him to” (“Three Men at Avoca”). Such activity was by no means limited to Nebraska; people with allegedly pro-German allegiances, including ministers, were tarred and feathered “in at least thirteen states . . . and in some cases [this] resulted in fatalities” (Kirschbaum 129, 141).

This widespread anti-German feeling ultimately appears to have served as an opportunity for the Ku Klux Klan to return to a number of communities. When I spoke about anti-German activities during World War I in Omaha in 2014, two people came to me separately afterward to tell how the story had been passed down in their families of Ku Klux Klan groups coming to their German relatives’ houses in two different Nebraska towns and burning crosses in their yards to intimidate them. Two newspaper reports of what appear to have been KKK attacks on ethnic Germans during this period support these personal accounts. One, from November 1917, described “a group of men clad in white robes” who tarred and feathered a Michigan man “accused of pro-Germanism” (“Tar and Feathers”). The second, from May 1918, recounted how “fifty white-robed persons” in Richmond, California, took one Guido Poenisch from his home, “tried’ [him] for loyalty, and then tarred and feathered” him (“Tarred and Feathered”).

Anti-German and generally anti-immigrant feelings were thus running at a fever pitch in the United States in the fall of 1918, when *My Ántonia* was published. Given this environment, one can understand how contemporary reviews of the novel, which conspicuously mentioned Ántonia’s Bohemian heritage and emphasized that *My Ántonia* was chiefly about immigrants, would not have likely served to boost sales. The reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* wrote, “There are other immigrants in the book besides the Shimerdas—Norwegians, Danes, Russians, etc.—and the ways of all of them are more or less fully described. They are all, to some extent, pioneers, the period of the book being that in which the first foreign immigrants came to Nebraska” (*Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* 79). The reviewer for the *New York Call* magazine stated, “This book gives us a picture of the



Emergency hospital during the Spanish flu epidemic, Camp Funston, Kansas, 1918. Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine.

grim and determined fight for life and prosperity of the vigorous foreigners who have settled in the West and helped to make it a land of fruitfulness” (83). These comments were undoubtedly intended as praise, but they probably served to prejudice the larger, generally xenophobic, reading public against the novel.

The marketing people at Houghton Mifflin appear to have recognized the general anti-immigrant feeling in the country much earlier than did these reviewers. This is suggested in the way Houghton Mifflin reacted to Cather’s complaints about their not having used favorable reviews in their initial advertising. In response, the firm created a dust jacket for later printings of the first edition but, instead of using the tepid two promotional paragraphs mentioned earlier or reprinting parts of the glowing reviews about *My Ántonia* as an “immigrant” novel, they reproduced excerpts of reviews from *Reedy’s St. Louis Mirror*, *Smart Set*, *Detroit Saturday Night*, and the *Chicago Daily News* that not once mentioned immigrants or the Bohemian Ántonia. Instead, undoubtedly in an attempt to strike a patriotic chord among prospective book purchasers, the word “American” appears a total of five times in these quoted sections.

As if the war itself weren’t reason enough for many potential book-buyers in the United States to distrust anything or anyone “foreign” in late 1918, the influenza epidemic that swept across the globe in 1918 likely would have further encouraged them to believe that any “outsiders,” or cultural products with a “foreign” tinge, were a threat to public health. Even though this deadly flu strain had originated in Haskell County, Kansas, in the spring of 1918 and subsequently spread rapidly to Europe and other parts of the globe due to the dispersion of American troops (Barry 169–170), it was widely known as the “Spanish influenza” in

the United States because initially Americans believed it had originated in Spain (Barry 171). In large part this was because for several months after the first outbreak in Europe, Spain was the only country where the flu's ravages were openly reported, since other countries (including the United States) did not want their enemies to know how it was decimating their troop strength (Barry 171). Many Americans, too, were led by news reports to believe the flu came from the Germans ("Medical Science's Newest Discoveries"). In other words, a threat that actually had originated within the United States was recast in the public's imagination as a "foreign" disease.

By late September 1918, the flu was spreading across the United States and the world, chiefly through military training camps, including those where many of the troops from Webster County had been sent, such as the flu's epicenter at Camp Funston, Fort Riley, Kansas (Cooper-Skjelver 315). Many times more Americans eventually died of the flu (approximately 675,000) than died from fighting in the war itself (116,000) (Barry 397).

American newspapers in the fall of 1918 were filled with stories about the flu pandemic. Even in Red Cloud, the brief front-page note in the *Red Cloud Chief* on October 17 about *My Antonia* being newly available at the Auld Library had to compete with news of the deaths and funerals of two young men from Red Cloud who had died at Fort Devens, Massachusetts ("At the Auld Library" and "In Memoriam"). These notices do not mention the flu, but everyone would have known the real cause of these deaths; after all, on one of the inside pages of the same day's issue one could read about multiple events in Nebraska being cancelled due to the flu and about the disease raging across the state ("Short State Notes"). In Red Cloud the schools were closed and "the local health board prohibited public gatherings from October 24 to November 2 in an attempt to halt the spread of the flu" (Cooper-Skjelver 315). Cather was fully aware of how attention-consuming the influenza pandemic was. She told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in a letter dated December 3, "It's cruel how many boys have died in our training camps here [in the United States]. Before I left Red Cloud we had seven funerals in one week for boys who were sent home from Camp Dodge, Iowa. The rumor is that more of our boys have died in camp at home than have been killed in France" (*Selected Letters* 264). Many of Cather's friends and acquaintances caught the flu, and some died of it; somehow, though, Cather herself never contracted it (273).

Is it any wonder, then, that the release of a relatively little-known Nebraska author's fourth novel in late September 1918 might have had a difficult time gaining many people's attention, either in Nebraska or in the rest of the country? Not only would the flu have distracted people—it's hard to think of reading fiction

when a deadly virus seems to threaten from every quarter—but the flu's linkage to a "foreign contagion" would also have prompted many readers to not be very interested in a novel that was as pro-immigrant as *My Antonia*.

Worthy of further investigation, too, but beyond the scope of this essay, are the ways in which the anti-German hysteria and flu pandemic caused by World War I possibly affected the ways in which those readers who bought the novel actually responded to it. Were these readers predisposed to see Tiny's and Lena's successes as "American" success stories, or as "foreign" opportunism? Were *Antonia's* many children a cause for celebration or a threat to the "native stock" gene pool? How did readers respond to the fact that the heroine of *My Antonia*, even after thirty years living in the United States, still spoke Bohemian at home with her husband and children, and as a result, "the little ones could not speak English at all—didn't learn it until they went to school" (*My Antonia* 324)? Did the implicit critique of the nativists of Black Hawk offend readers? How many would have identified with the xenophobic tramp who commits suicide as he shouts, "My God! . . . so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy" (172)? Some might even have regarded him as a symbolic and tragic victim of too many immigrants being allowed into the country.

Undoubtedly both Cather and her editor Ferris Greenslet would have been well aware of the widespread anti-foreign sentiment pervading the United States during the years 1916 through 1918. Whether Cather considered it when she was constructing *My Antonia* or whether Houghton Mifflin thought of this when making the decision about its release date is unknown. It appears clear, however, that if one were most concerned with ensuring high initial sales and popularity for *My Antonia*, a novel that portrayed immigrants very positively, September 1918 was not a good time for its publication. On the other hand, one might say that if a novel's success is judged more by the degree to which it interrogates prevailing ideologies, Cather's celebration of immigrants could not have come at a better time. One might criticize Cather for not having directly confronted the anti-German xenophobia of the time in her novel in some way, and it is possible she purposely avoided including any major characters of German heritage out of fear that their inclusion would hurt sales. But whatever Cather's intentions, the novel's very positive portrayals of *Antonia*, *Lena*, and *Tiny*, as well as its numerous references to hardworking Swedes, Norwegians, Bohemians, and Danes, still implicitly offered a rebuke to the nativist sentiments espoused not only by some of the fictional citizens of Black Hawk but also, during the war, by numerous Americans across the country.



Today, as the United States is experiencing another generalized wave of anti-immigrant feeling similar to what swept the country from 1917 to 1919, it is again a great time to read *My Ántonia*. Doing so can serve as a valuable reminder to readers not to stereotype people from particular nationalities and religions as dangerous criminals who should be quarantined and not allowed to spread their “disease” to America and Americans. Ántonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, and the three Swedish Marys, along with countless immigrants from other countries, eventually thrived and made important contributions to the United States. Members of America’s latest generation of immigrants will undoubtedly do so as well.

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