

Tamás Kubik
Internship Report
University Archives, Sewanee, TN
Summer 2013

This summer I was an exhibit research intern at the University Archives and Special Collections under the guidance of Rachel Hildebrandt, guest curator and Kevin Reynolds, Assistant University Librarian for Learning and Access Services. I conducted an independent, directed research on the contextual stories that provide a historical background to the experience of the German and Austrian-Hungarian prisoners of war detained at Fr. Oglethorpe, Georgia, during World War I. The results of my investigation will, in part, serve as materials for the exhibition that will coincide with the centennial honoring of the war. The exhibition will open in the fall of 2013, and the exhibition panels will showcase the experiences of various university and Sewanee Military Academy students and alumni during World War I, as well as the impact of the war on the southeastern Tennessee region. As community members were leaving for the front, thousands of Europeans, mainly German citizens trapped in the United States at the outbreak of the war, were arrested and detained at a large camp in Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia.

This research project on the historical background to the stories of community members and German prisoners began with my internship. During the six weeks of my internship, I wrote 1-2 page essays every week on a range of different topics that provide historical context to the individual stories to be showcased in the exhibition. The topics included anti-German sentiment in the U.S. during World War I, surveillance and the American Protective League, Woodrow Wilson's decisions and orders pertaining to enemy aliens, life in the Fort Oglethorpe camp, and the Espionage and Sedition Acts. These short essays will serve as raw material for drafting copy for the labels and banners in the exhibition, as well as for a pamphlet that will provide age-appropriate interpretive material for visitors from the local secondary schools.

I wrote the weekly 1-2 page papers on the various topics after consulting a wide array of primary and secondary sources. These sources included online and print sources; some period

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newspapers, with a focus on the New York Times, whose past issues are available online. I also consulted the available government documents in the library to determine Wilson's attitude and policies towards enemy aliens living in the U.S. after 1914, for instance, the Attorney General's annual report of 1918. Probably the most interesting source I used was the Bureau of Investigation (the latter day FBI) files available on the fold3.com website, where I found the files kept on several German citizens detained at Fort Oglethorpe. It was even more fascinating to compare and contrast Erich Posselt's account (a German writer labeled propagandist) with the ones his interrogators put down in his files. I finished the research project over the course of a bit more than six weeks, with weekly discussion with my advisors, and ended up being able to write five reports out of the planned six.

Part of the challenge of these reports was that they had to be broad and general in nature as they will be used to provide a background to the exhibited artifacts and showcased stories. I found it particularly hard to keep my reports short (strictly less than two pages, preferably closer to one page), since I amassed several pages of notes. In fact, after working on the first topic (which was anti-German sentiment and propaganda, a topic that particularly interested me) and completing the report on it, I had to realize that I gathered twelve pages of notes, which I consequently had to distill into two pages. This way I found that I had little time to linger on primary resources and sought out secondary resources instead that provided some of the broad background descriptions that I was supposed to compile as well.

Since my research was more descriptive than analytical or argumentative in nature, I cannot report any new or groundbreaking findings. I learned a lot about the propaganda machine utilized by the U.S. that dehumanized Germans, the particularly interesting legislation of Espionage and Sedition Acts that practically suspended free speech as it is laid down in the First Amendment, and also about the

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volunteer vigilantes who sacrificed their own time and money to spy on their fellow citizens', ready to report the slightest sign of disloyalty from their part. Probably the most important aspect of this research is when it is put into the broader context of the twentieth century. The camps established for Germans during World War I served as a model for the much harsher internment camps that the Japanese were confined in during World War II. Also, the legal and institutional framework created during World War I to suppress voices of dissent, argues Stephen Kohn in *American Political Prisoners*, remain intact today and were used and abused during the anti-communist witch hunts and the suppression of grass-roots movements in the 1960s, like the civil rights or women's rights movements.

Personally, I found the different instances of hatred for the Germans, the "foreigners," the "Others," the most interesting and naturally revolting at the same time. I found it fascinating how the British tried to dehumanize the Germans by referring to them as "Huns," which they meant synonymous to barbarians and also tried to deny their common Anglo-Saxon origin. Such rhetoric calls to mind the language of the colonizers to justify their conquest of Africa and Southeast Asia. Moreover, another recurring phenomenon of the era was the "We speak English here" type of discourse, which we hear a lot of today used against Latinos instead of Germans. A study of the methods of the propaganda to fuel hatred for a particular group of people can be imperative in helping people unlearn their prejudice and in preventing genocide in the future.

Next year, I am going to continue my studies at the Central European University's Nationalism Studies Program, which focuses on questions of national identity, national feeling, nation formation, and ethnic conflict, among many different things. My study of anti-German sentiment in the United States during World War I provided me with an insight into the workings of the propaganda machinery to generate hatred and the type of rhetoric that is used to that effect. In the future, I hope to become a

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scholar of Positive Discourse Analysis, which aims at subverting the rhetoric of hatred and prejudice and replacing it with the stories of the successes of the oppressed in overcoming their oppression.