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Russell A. Kazal: Becoming Old Stock

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Introduction

MORE Americans trace their ancestry to Germany than to any other country, according to the federal census.¹ Arguably, by this measure, people of German descent form the nation's largest ethnic group. Yet that fact could easily elude the casual observer of American life. Today, comparatively few signs remain of the once formidable political clout, organizational life, and ethnic consciousness of German Americans. Over the twentieth century, the ethnicity that went by that label underwent what the historian Kathleen Conzen calls a "thorough submergence."²

This ethnic eclipse is reflected publicly in the calendar of American holidays and, more privately, in survey research. There is no nationally recognized tribute to German ethnicity to compete with St. Patrick's Day or Columbus Day. On a regional level, the Midwest, which drew the greatest concentrations of nineteenth-century German immigrants, does seem more willing to display its German ethnic roots, as a visitor to Cincinnati's annual Downtown Oktoberfest might note. Yet in the mid-Atlantic—the focus of eighteenth-century German settlement and a close second to the Midwest as a destination for nineteenth-century German newcomers—German ethnicity has a remarkably low profile. In the popular imagination, the descendants of eighteenth-century Rhenish immigrants who populated the Pennsylvania backcountry are known as "Pennsylvania Dutch," a usage that evokes the Netherlands. The region's cities yield barely a sign that they once hosted some of the nation's largest populations of German immigrants.

Such ethnic quiescence is brought into sharp focus when one compares it with local manifestations of Irish identity. The bulk of Irish and German immigrants to the United States arrived at roughly the same time, in waves running from the 1830s to the 1890s. Survey research carried out in the mid-1980s in the Albany, New York, area, however, found that while Irish and German ancestries were each claimed by roughly one-third of native-born whites, only some 20 percent of respondents saw *themselves* as "German," compared with 31 percent who asserted an "Irish" identity.³ One can see a similar contrast in how Philadelphia celebrates these two ethnicities. The city's annual Steuben Day parade in September draws scattered onlookers to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, but a visitor strolling through other downtown sections might never know that the day was dedicated to a German immigrant who became a Revolutionary

War hero. On March 17, that same pedestrian would find it impossible to miss the fact that Philadelphia was honoring St. Patrick. At the most prosaic level, she or he could not walk down Center City's Walnut Street for more than two blocks without having to maneuver around a line of people snaking out of a bar with green plastic hats on their heads.

The eclipse of German-American identity today is all the more startling, given its condition at the beginning of the twentieth century. Then, German Americans were perhaps the best-organized, most visible, and most respected group of newcomers in the United States. Germans, whose migration to America peaked in the 1880s, made up the largest single nationality among the foreign-born during the 1910s, greater in number than the Poles, Italians, and other southern and eastern Europeans of the "new immigration." The National German-American Alliance, a federation of ethnic associations, laid claim by 1914 to more than two million members. Before the First World War, the Germans were widely esteemed as "one of the most assimilable and reputable of immigrant groups"; a group of professional people surveyed in 1908 ranked German immigrants ahead of English ones and, in some respects, above native-born whites.⁴

German Americans, in other words, present an unsettling paradox. If ours is an age of multiculturalism—as many Americans like to think—then how is it that the nation's largest ethnic group has gone missing from the national scene and in regions like the mid-Atlantic? How do scholars square this awkward fact with the depictions of an enduring American pluralism that have dominated the historical literature on immigration and ethnicity since the 1960s? The German-American case thus forces us to confront the much larger question of assimilation.

Assimilation as a topic was largely neglected by historians in the 1970s and early 1980s, as I have argued elsewhere,⁵ and it remains controversial. By the early 1960s, notions of assimilation and Americanization cast ethnic Americans as remaking themselves to fit an Anglo-American core culture. Such ideas did not survive the decade; their underlying assumptions were torpedoed by cultural and political upheaval. The Vietnam War discredited "the Anglo-American establishment," antiwar and civil rights protests cast doubt on the virtue of a uniform American national culture, and a resurgent black separatism fueled more general affirmations of pluralism and group identities. For many immigration historians, mindful of the very real, coercive side of early twentieth-century Americanization efforts, assimilation and Americanization became "myths" to be "vanquished."⁶ Those scholars instead stressed ethnic persistence within a pluralistic society.

Historians in the 1970s and 1980s produced many intriguing and sophisticated studies of particular ethnic and racial groups. Yet rejecting as-

similation hindered, rather than aided, their understanding of pluralism, for those two phenomena are deeply intertwined.⁷ The study of pluralism requires examining not just ethnic groups but also the relations among them, and those relations can have an assimilative effect in drawing groups or their members closer to one another. Postwar theorists such as Will Herberg and Milton Gordon understood this; they depicted many European Americans as submerging their specific ethnic identities in the broader religious ones of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.⁸

Since the early 1980s, an interest in pluralism has helped lead a number of historians toward a cautious reexamination of assimilation. They have revisited the topic without resurrecting the idea of an Anglo-American core. Some immigration historians now view assimilation, in essence, as one of a number of processes operating historically *within* a pluralist order that itself has evolved.⁹ They and other historians have come to understand that process as one by which European ethnics of different national backgrounds found common ground with one another or with longer-settled Americans. These scholars have described assimilation along class lines, via an industrial unionism that united an ethnically split working class in the 1930s; along lines of race, with European immigrants learning to adopt a common “white” racial identity; and, relatedly, through an emerging mass culture and a brand of American nationalism that allowed those newcomers to join an “imagined community” of specifically white Americans.¹⁰

These works have shaped my own understanding of assimilation and ethnic identity. I use “assimilation” to refer to processes that result in greater homogeneity within a society. Such processes may operate at different levels: among individuals, between groups, or between groups and a dominant group in the society. They may operate within different arenas, with individuals or groups drawn together in terms of culture or intermarriage or shared institutions or shared elements of identity, such as “whiteness.” And they may operate to varying degrees within and across different arenas. In the immigrant context, I find it most useful to see assimilation as referring to processes that generate homogeneity beyond the level of the ethnic group.¹¹ “Ethnic group” itself refers, in Milton Gordon’s sense, to a group with “a shared feeling of peoplehood” tied to a specific Old World ancestry.¹² “Identity” in its most basic sense refers to an individual’s sense of self,¹³ a construct to some extent both volitional and ascribed. In the words of one historian, identity “concerns how individuals understand their place in the social world as well as how others view them.” Key to the concept is the insight that individuals hold multiple identities in the form of socially recognized categories: a particular person can see herself at one and the same time as, for example, a middle-class professional, a woman, a white, an American, and someone of Ger-

man descent.¹⁴ Such an individual may partake of various collective or group identities, each of which, on its own terms, seems singular. Collective identity “tends to appear homogeneous and based on clear boundaries for the sake of expression beyond the group.”¹⁵ But for the individual, changes in how one views oneself can be accomplished by emphasizing one collective identity over another, by introducing new elements to the mix of identities one holds, or by holding a collective identity that itself is changing internally. The different identities of any one person ebb, flow, and interact in complex ways that can result, over time, in a significantly different self-image.

Like other historians revisiting assimilation, I seek to understand its operation within particular historical contexts and its long-term social and political consequences. Here, the German-American experience cries out for study. As John Higham noted, that experience represents the most “spectacular case of collective assimilation” in the last century.¹⁶ Historians of German America certainly never neglected assimilation, and they have long offered explanations for why the group’s ethnic profile fell so dramatically. The most obvious relates to the contingencies of twentieth-century history. That century saw the United States fight two world wars against Germany and witnessed the genocide perpetrated by the Third Reich; it therefore left Americans with few incentives to identify with a German ancestry. Even before those events, institutional German America—which encompassed everything from secular gymnastic and singing societies to German Lutheran congregations and German Catholic national parishes—was unraveling. Historians such as John Hawgood once pointed to the intense nativist backlash that accompanied American intervention in World War I as the key to the destruction of this ethnic world.¹⁷ More recently, Guido Andre Dobbert, James Bergquist, and other scholars have portrayed German ethnic institutions as suffering a long-term decline beginning in the 1890s.¹⁸

Yet, while we know much about the erosion of German America, we know little of the fate of those who left it. If many Americans of German background were leaving German ethnic circles at the beginning of the twentieth century, where did they then go? What kind of Americans did most German Americans become once their ethnic identity was so strikingly submerged? Did they reshape their multiple identities in ways that reflect or that go beyond the findings of assimilation’s reappraisers? Specifically, what role did class, gender, religion, mass culture, nation, and race play in their redefinitions? Did German Americans, for example, find refuge in the “monolithic whiteness” that Matthew Jacobson sees as flattening “racial” distinctions among European immigrants after the 1920s? Did they take to the powerful and often exclusive American nationalism that Gary Gerstle depicts as dominating much of American life between

the First World War and the 1960s?¹⁹ Or did they find other routes away from German America?

Such questions lead to broader ones. German Americans, who belonged to so large an ethnic group, could not redefine themselves without affecting others. What impact did their choices have on other groups and on American pluralism as such? How, in light of the German case, has that pluralist order itself been reshaped over the twentieth century? Pluralism, in turn, has had a long and complicated relationship with American nationalism, for diversity raises the question of how to reconcile *pluribus* and *unum*, the many and the one—the group constituents of society and the aspiration to unity inherent in the idea of the nation. How, then, has American nationalism changed in relation to a changing pluralism? Similarly, race has long operated as an organizing principle of American pluralism and, to some extent, American nationalism. But if European ethnics, including Germans, in part assimilated to a white racial identity, what has the nature of that whiteness been, and how has it changed over time?

When looking for answers to large questions, it sometimes helps to dig in small places. I address the issues of assimilation, pluralism, nationalism, and race that the German-American paradox raises by reconstructing the fate of that group in one such place: Philadelphia from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1930s. This work is, in great measure, a study of identity change—of how some Germans moved away from ethnic affiliations and toward new formulations of multiple identity. I feel that such changes are best traced within the tight geographic focus of a case study. That focus allows one to connect shifts in identity to specific social and demographic changes—local as well as regional and national—including changing relations with non-Germans, which form an essential part of this story.

At first glance, the choice of Philadelphia might seem questionable. That city could appear less representative of the German-American experience than the heavily German cities of the Midwest, which have formed the focus of much historical writing on German America. Yet Philadelphia offers key advantages for a study of assimilation. It allows one to examine that process in a region, the mid-Atlantic, that took the waning of German-American identity further than appears to be the case in the urban Midwest and that nonetheless had a substantial urban German population. Philadelphia itself is a case in point. Only 5.5 percent of its inhabitants were German immigrants in 1900, but its rank as the nation's third-largest city meant that it had more German-born residents than Buffalo, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, or St. Louis.²⁰ Philadelphia, moreover, held a strategically important position within German America. The National German-American Alliance, which rallied German associations across the

country to resist assimilation, was founded in the city in 1901 under the leadership of a coterie of local middle-class activists. One of them, Charles J. Hexamer, served as the organization's president and guiding spirit until 1917. Finally, while German Philadelphia's story differs in certain respects from the German experience in Midwestern cities, there are, nonetheless, striking and important parallels between them, as we shall see.

This book argues that in the first third of the twentieth century, many German Philadelphians, especially the children of immigrants, retreated from a "German-American" identity and instead crafted new multiple identities keyed to particular understandings of race, religion, mass culture, and the American nation. Today's marked submergence of German-American ethnicity owes a great deal to the anti-German backlash of the First World War, yet that was just one of several developments that came together during the 1910s and 1920s to reshape German Philadelphians' sense of self. Those developments also included the rise of a narrower, more conformist American nationalism that discredited older, pluralist views of the nation; a related tide of racialized nativism; and the first Great Migration of black Southerners to the North, which transformed Philadelphia's racial geography during and after the war.

The convergence of these events both pushed and enticed many Philadelphians of German background to rework their identities, but their response was hardly uniform. Rather, it varied along lines of class, religion, and, to some extent, gender that had long divided German Philadelphia. Some middle-class and Lutheran Germans embraced an "American" identity cast in opposition to Italians, Poles, and other southern and eastern European "new immigrants." At its extreme, this stance employed the language of racialized nativism to recast German Philadelphians as "old-stock" or "Nordic" Americans. They were deemed superior to new immigrants because their racial "stock" was better and because it was older—German settlers having brought it to the mid-Atlantic before the Revolution. In contrast, many working-class and Catholic Philadelphians of German background had by the 1920s begun to mix, in their associations and parishes, with Irish and new immigrant neighbors. These workers and Catholics increasingly saw themselves as sharing a common white identity with such neighbors, an identity that gained in salience with the increased presence of African Americans near working-class European-American neighborhoods. Here, the interwar period saw a foretaste of a type that would emerge, decades later, as the "white ethnic." Women as well as men partook of such identities, but the different social contexts and expectations women faced meant they could understand those identities somewhat differently. Moreover, German women took particular advantage of a separate development that predated the war: the rise of a mass consumer culture, which offered women new kinds of identity grounded in their emerging role as consumers.

Like all historical arguments, this one has limitations. First, it describes a number of important ways in which Philadelphians of German descent distanced themselves from their ethnic origins; it does not, however, attempt to account for all such redefinitions or for every multiple identity cast anew in the 1920s and 1930s. There were many paths out of German America, and this study claims only to have identified some of the more significant routes. Indeed, some Philadelphians of German background never left: a scattering of German voluntary associations, including some examined in this study, still exist today. Second, the book traces the fate of German Philadelphia in part by following four of its most important subcultures: those created by middle-class residents active in secular ethnic associations, working-class socialists, Catholics, and Lutherans. Missing from this list, of course, is the city's German Jewish community. This latter subculture, though smaller than the other four, played a not insignificant role in German Philadelphia; leaving it unaddressed creates a gap in the narrative. However, to explore the German Jewish experience in any depth would have entailed engagement with a massive historiography and an additional set of historical problems. In the interests of finishing this study—and, not incidentally, containing the size of an already lengthy manuscript—I felt it best to let that omission stand.

This story of how German-American identity waned in the early twentieth century and what some German Americans found to replace it, is told in four parts. Part 1 examines German Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century. That entity, like German America in general, was remarkably diverse. It encompassed, as chapter 1 describes, a plethora of voluntary associations, or *Vereine*, that reflected the different worlds of middle-class secular club members, working-class socialists, German Catholics, and German Lutherans, to name only the largest such groupings. Yet these subcultures were held together, to some extent, by a common sense of “Germanness,” expressed in the use of the German language and mobilized when values common to the group, such as the moderate social consumption of alcohol, came under attack by non-Germans. Chapter 2 focuses on two turn-of-the-century neighborhoods to examine the degree to which assimilatory processes already had made inroads into German Philadelphia: the heavily German, heavily working-class Girard Avenue district; and Germantown, a suburb that was more middle-class and, ironically, far less German. This chapter uses samples drawn from the 1900 federal manuscript census to show that first- and second-generation German immigrants experienced their streets in the Girard Avenue district as a majority, while Germantown's German-stock minority had as their immediate neighbors a mix of residents of northwest European background. These demographic realities were reflected in local institutions, from the German Lutheran and Catholic churches of Girard Avenue's German neighborhood to such Germantown fixtures as the Business Men's

Association, whose founders included first- and second-generation English, German, and Irish immigrants, as well as descendants of colonial settlers. Germantown here provided a hint of the future. The Business Men's Association did not evince a common, northwest European consciousness, but its composition indicated the potential for such an identity.

Philadelphia's German associational world—what German residents referred to as the city's *Vereinswesen*—began a slow decline in the 1890s, as German immigration passed its peak and the children of immigrants turned away from the affiliations of their parents. Part 2 addresses this crisis of assimilation in the years before World War I and the steps some middle-class activists took to stem it. Chapter 3 examines the crisis itself. It was a curiously uneven, indeed, a gendered phenomenon. While many male associations lost members, female organizations grew, as women carved out a larger place for themselves in the city's German-American public sphere.

Still, the membership losses raised the question of where the second generation had gone. The next two chapters consider some of the alternative identities available to such children of German Philadelphia—among them, emerging forms of collective identity. As chapter 4 describes, these included a range of new affiliations grounded in the new mass culture, which itself had an ambiguous impact on German ethnic identity. Because mass commercial culture drew heavily on German-American models of sociability, it could be appropriated to serve the *Vereinswesen* as a source of renewal, as one German association discovered. Nonetheless, many working-class as well as middle-class Germans seem to have succumbed to the lure of commercialized leisure and consumer culture in ways that tended to pull them away from traditional *Verein* pursuits and to de-emphasize the ethnic element of their multiple identities. Consumer culture in particular fostered alternative identities that were especially open to women.

The years before 1914, however, also saw the emergence of new kinds of collective identity that fused racial and national feeling, as chapter 5 argues. German Philadelphians had long known that they were white, although that identification was less salient at the turn of the century than it would later become. Now, within Anglo-America and under the impress of an increasingly racialized nativism, there arose terms denoting a common northwest European consciousness, such as “American race stock” and “old stock.” These represented invitations to join a common northwest European group defined as “American” in opposition to southern and eastern European immigrants—although German Philadelphians would, for the time being, leave such invitations unanswered.

In the meantime, activists from Philadelphia's leading middle-class associations moved to shore up the *Vereinswesen* by creating a nationwide

organization of German associations—the National German-American Alliance. As chapter 6 describes, this revitalization effort attempted to make German America more attractive to second-generation immigrants by writing it into the center of American history through, among other things, a series of monuments to Germans involved in the nation’s founding. The chapter examines the alliance’s campaign to raise one such monument in the center of Germantown in commemoration of the neighborhood’s colonial German settlers. The effort’s high point came in 1908, when the alliance sponsored a massive cornerstone-laying ceremony, timed to coincide with the 225th anniversary of Germantown’s founding. The event emphasized the long history of German settlement and thereby inadvertently underscored German Americans’ qualifications for a north-west European group seen as superior due not only to its racial characteristics but also to its long residence in America. Yet the commemoration reflected as well the alliance’s inability to foster a German-American identity across class and religious divides that was more than episodic. While many unionized workers took part in the event, their participation two years later in a citywide general strike demonstrated their willingness to put class above ethnic solidarity to the extent of cooperating with new immigrant workers.

The slow hemorrhaging of membership in the *Vereinswesen*, while it suggested a degree of ethnic flight, did not entail the massive submergence of German-American ethnicity nor an attendant large-scale recasting of identities. The event that precipitated those developments was, rather, the First World War—the subject of part 3. Initially, the European war actually heightened the ethnic consciousness and unity of those Philadelphians of German background who remained within the *Vereinswesen*, as chapter 7 describes. Many middle-class activists, socialist workers, Catholics, and Lutherans rallied to Germany’s defense between 1914 and 1916. Yet the neutrality period also saw a reaction among Anglo-Americans and other non-Germans against such ethnic activism, a backlash expressed in attacks on the national loyalty of “hyphenated Americans” and, eventually, demands that they be “100 percent American.” Chapter 8 examines how, with America’s entry into the war, this “antihyphen” movement metamorphosed into an anti-German panic. What began as a suspicion of German Philadelphians as potential spies and saboteurs mushroomed into a general assault on German ethnic expression itself and on the very legitimacy of views of the nation—like the National Alliance’s—that allowed for a degree of ethnic separatism and, hence, cultural pluralism. Fed in part by the federal government’s effort to mobilize support for the war, the panic led to the destruction of the National Alliance, the ending of German instruction in the city’s public schools, and the hounding of ordinary German Philadelphians, at times by mobs. As a

result, the public expression of German ethnicity became virtually impossible during and immediately after the war and remained problematic thereafter.

The fall of public Germanness had consequences that extended into the 1920s and beyond, consequences explored in part 4. While some German organizations took tentative steps to reassert a public presence, they never again acted with the aggressiveness of the prewar years. Those ethnic institutions that survived the panic manifested a strikingly subdued ethnicity in the 1920s. Chapter 9 examines how the postwar *Vereinswesen* not only remained reticent but also changed internally. German institutions continued to shrink, in part because mass culture competed ever more strongly for the attention of German Philadelphians, generating such new collective identities as radio fan. Many of those institutions, moreover, acquired more and more non-German members during and after the 1920s. Some working-class *Vereine* took on the character of ethnically mixed neighborhood social centers, while German Catholic parishes increasingly took in Irish, Slavic, and Italian members. Chapter 10 revisits the Girard Avenue district and Germantown to illustrate how these shifts occurred within a context of ethnic and racial succession. By the 1920s, the working-class area around Girard Avenue had become less German and less Protestant as southern and eastern European immigrants streamed in. The district's dwindling number of German-stock residents increasingly found themselves mixing with these new neighbors in their streets and Catholic parishes. Germantown's first- and second-generation German immigrants were ensconced more than ever in northwest European worlds, but their neighborhood had become home to Italian and African-American "colonies."

In the altered climate of the 1920s, many Philadelphians who were descended from nineteenth-century German immigrants reached for new definitions of self that downplayed their German ethnic heritage. These new identities were shaped by a number of forces, including mass culture, the more conformist, "100 percent American" nationalism ushered in by the war, the war-related migration of thousands of black Southerners to Philadelphia, and the rise of a racialized nativism that pitted allegedly superior northwest Europeans against southern and eastern European newcomers. The children and grandchildren of immigrants growing up during the decade strongly felt the impulse to define themselves as American first and as German only secondarily, if at all. But the meaning of such "American" affiliations tended to vary along the historic divisions of German Philadelphia. Chapter 11 explores how some middle-class and Lutheran Philadelphians of German descent shaped their American identities in opposition to Italians, Poles, and other southern and eastern European immigrants. At one end of this range stood second-generation Ger-

man immigrants who belonged to nativist groups intent on excluding new immigrants or who joined Americanization efforts aimed at reforming them. Groups such as the Americanization Committee of Germantown drew on the language of racialized nativism to cast their members—including those of German background—as northwest Europeans who shared the common racial “stock” of “our forefathers.” This stock was valued in part because it was old; here, German Philadelphians qualified for admission because German settlement had a history that stretched back to colonial Pennsylvania. Lutherans of German descent who proselytized Italians for the Inner Mission Society eschewed such racialist language but nevertheless betrayed a sense of being American in contrast to their Italian clients.

Working-class and Catholic Philadelphians of German descent were less likely to voice American identities of this kind, in part because they were mixing with Irish and new immigrant neighbors in their associations and parishes. Rather, as chapter 12 describes, these workers and Catholics increasingly felt they had whiteness in common with those neighbors, a sense encouraged by the appearance of African Americans at the edges of their neighborhoods. Racial succession in one German Catholic parish, St. Ignatius’, for example, helped foster a sense among its members that they counted less as Germans than as “white Catholics.” The rising salience of white identity for such German Philadelphians foreshadowed the emergence, years later, of another working-class patriotic, often Catholic figure—the “white ethnic.”

The book’s conclusion briefly sketches German Philadelphia’s history after the early 1930s and considers the larger significance of its story. That story was, in some ways, a singular tale. Compared to the urban Midwest, Philadelphia and other mid-Atlantic cities had smaller concentrations of German immigrants; that fact likely contributed to a German ethnic profile lower than one would find, even today, in Cincinnati or Milwaukee. The German-American experience itself, moreover, was somewhat idiosyncratic. No other large immigrant group in the twentieth century saw its country of origin twice go to war with the United States; none, correspondingly, faced such sustained pressure to forgo its ethnic identity for an “American” one; and none appeared to mute its ethnic identity to so great an extent.

Nevertheless, as the conclusion relates, the experience of German Philadelphia speaks to larger developments within and beyond German America. First, it underscores the importance of space, especially regional differences, in shaping assimilation. The historically higher concentrations of Germans in Midwestern cities have made public displays of German ethnicity more possible there than in the mid-Atlantic in the years since the First World War, even though many German Midwesterners, too,

left the ethnic fold. The mid-Atlantic, on the other hand, had a history of colonial German immigration that made it particularly fertile ground for old-stock identities open to later German arrivals and their children. Midwestern Germans also could claim such identities, but since their region lacked a German presence in the colonial period, they may have given their “American” self-definitions a somewhat different spin. The process of assimilation, in other words, can vary significantly over space; those studying it should be attuned to its local and regional inflections.

Second, the German-American case presents an extreme example of assimilatory pressures that other ethnic groups also faced, if to a lesser extent. The rise of a mass commercial and consumer culture challenged the autonomy of nearly every ethnic community in this period, and women of many ethnic backgrounds, not just Germans, embraced the specifically female, consumption-oriented identities that culture fostered. If German workers and Catholics in interwar Philadelphia reshaped their identities in ways that anticipated the “white ethnic,” so, too, did their counterparts in Chicago and Detroit during the 1940s. In Chicago, for example, Germans participated with Irish and eastern European residents in heavily Catholic and working-class mobs that fought to keep blacks from moving into their “white” neighborhoods and parishes. Chicago’s working-class and Catholic Germans thereby helped to create a common ground that necessarily influenced the identities of their Irish and new immigrant collaborators. Similarly, when middle-class Germans took refuge in a racial nationalism, they cooperated with other northwest Europeans and echoed the behavior of such other “Nordic” groups as Norwegian Americans. German involvement in nativist groups, moreover, reinforced the message that old-stock or Nordic Americans made the best kind of Americans—a message with which members of every ethnic group, “old immigrant” or not, had to grapple.

Finally, and relatedly, the German-American ordeal during and after World War I played a crucial role in shaping both twentieth-century American pluralism and American nationalism. The constricted “100 percent American” nationalism that arose in the 1910s represented an all-out attack on ethnic pluralism—both the idea of it and the *de facto* pluralist order that had emerged in the United States before the First World War. That conformist nationalism, with its demand for undivided national loyalty and its corresponding denigration of “hyphenated” ethnic allegiances, would last, in one form or another, until the 1960s. Its long reign, in a very real sense, was made possible by the forcible submergence of German-American identity in the 1910s. For German America, and the National Alliance in particular, was the strongest bearer of what today would be called multicultural concepts of the nation—including the notion that an evolving United States was continually shaped by the contri-

butions of its different ethnic groups. Advocates of conformist nationalism could not succeed unless they first disabled such rival, pluralist visions of the nation. The war allowed them to do so; among other things, it enabled them to destroy the alliance.

At the same time, the pluralist order of today's United States bears traces of the effort German Americans made to recast their identities. That order is fundamentally structured by lines of color, but the European Americans who go by the common designation of "white" retain a measure of internal ethnic differentiation—despite depictions, like Jacobson's, of the ultimate victory of a monolithic whiteness. Such depictions run up against recent sociological research that finds a continuing, if faint, divide between white ethnics on one side and "unhyphenated Americans" of old-stock European background on the other. German Americans, who straddle this division, helped construct it between the world wars. Some took initial steps toward the creation of the "white ethnic;" others joined nativist groups that promoted a deep racial divide between "unhyphenated" northwest European "Americans" and southeast European immigrants. Even within the same ethnic group, that is, class and religious differences spawned different conceptions of whiteness. Although that status as such confers significant privileges on both ethnic and unhyphenated white Americans today, each group understands it differently. White ethnics turn ethnic identity itself into a vehicle for claiming Americanness, invoking a heroic immigrant saga that allows many to overlook the deep structures of discrimination still faced by nonwhites. In this and other ways, German Americans, inadvertently or not, have helped to structure American pluralism in a way that has continuing political consequences for Americans of all racial backgrounds.²¹

What happened to German America, in other words, was both singular in its intensity and consequential for the United States in general. The German-American ordeal of the early twentieth century, and the way German Americans responded to it, did a great deal to shape the landscape that other Americans had to cross. If we today scarcely recognize the impact German Americans made, that merely testifies to the depth of their transformation.