

**“VOM ALTEN VATERLAND ZUM NEUEN”:
GERMAN-AMERICANS, LETTERS FROM THE “OLD
HOMELAND,” AND THE GREAT WAR
MID-ATLANTIC GERMAN HISTORY SEMINAR**

Seminar at the GHI, May 10, 2003. Speaker: Joseph Neville (National Endowment for the Humanities). Conveners: Marion F. Deshmukh (George Mason University) and Christof Mauch (GHI).

The German Historical Institute sponsored the spring meeting of the biannual gathering of the Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar. Dr. Joseph Neville, Program Officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, presented the paper for spring 2003, in which he described two weekly newspapers that primarily served German-Americans living in Wilmington, Delaware: the English-language *Sunday Morning Star* and the German-language *Wilmington Lokal-Anzeiger und Freie Presse*. These two newspapers regularly printed wartime letters or excerpts of letters from Germany written to relatives in Wilmington. Neville's paper attempted to provide "a German and German-American perspective on both the personal and larger dimensions of the Great War." In addition, Neville addressed the issue of *Deutschtum*—the manner in which German-Americans in Wilmington addressed their loyalties to their former homeland before and after the United States entered the war in 1917.

The topics raised by the paper reflected the complexity of Wilmington's German-American community. The German proportion of Wilmington's "white foreign-born" population stood at just under 2,000 out of 13,678. Wilmington's total population at the time of the war's outbreak was 87,411. Some German-Americans were born in Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire while others were second or third-generation Americans of German heritage. Some remained fluent in the language and others read or spoke only English. Religious differences also complicated the picture because the German and German-American community belonged to an array of religious denominations from Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist, to Mennonite, Jewish or unaffiliated. In his paper, Neville raised the issue of a "counter-narrative" that emerges after examining the letters published during the 1914–1918 period. He noted that the published letters and articles served to "construct" an alternative picture to that of the English-language and generally pro-British newspapers that dominated in many cities, including Wilmington. Neville noted that by the end of the war, German-American newspapers had experienced a precipitous drop in circulation, and the German language

component almost disappeared. Indeed, at the end of the war, approximately 75% of all German-American newspapers had folded.

A lively discussion centered around questions raised by Neville's paper. Among the many questions raised were: 1) What effects did certain news events such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* or the disclosure of the Zimmermann Telegram have on German-American sentiments in Wilmington? 2) How did German relatives living in Germany perceive the United States and their relations living there? 3) Could one find German-Americans living in Wilmington who clearly identified with the German point of view regarding the war, its causes, and its execution? Or did German-American Wilmingtonians see themselves first as Americans? In other words, by 1914, how assimilated was the German community? Did this have an effect on the rather lackluster attendance at meetings calling for U.S. neutrality? 4) With Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, the newspapers ceased publishing letters from German relations to their kin in Delaware. How did this affect the readership of the two newspapers? And did U.S. military intelligence play a role in circumventing pro-German sentiments?

The wartime letters from Germany that were quoted and described in the speech display a rich source of materials. The German seminar encouraged Dr. Neville to extract some of the larger meanings from the letters, such as the manner in which they were "constructed narratives" (through selection and editing by the newspaper staff); how and if they mirrored general sentiments both in Germany and the United States; and ultimately, how the war affected the German-American community, using Wilmington as a case study. The seminar provided a fruitful forum for a wide-ranging discussion of German-American relations during wartime.

The Mid-Atlantic Seminar meets twice a year. For more information, please contact: Marion Deshmukh, Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, 3G1, Fairfax, VA 22030. Email: mdeshmuk@gmu.edu.

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