THE LOWERING of "Germania" from a St. Paul building symbolized anti-German fervor during World War I.
OF ALL THE CASES handled by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety during its brief official life, more than 56 per cent concerned members of the state’s German population. The seven-man commission, which some historians have called dictatorial and fascist, was “an interim agency” designed to take swift and decisive action toward “suppressing disloyal outbreaks and possible disturbances of order in communities where the German element was predominant” during World War I.\(^1\)

The Minnesota commission, modeled in a limited way on the National Council of Defense created by Congress three days after United States entry into World War I, was the first such state agency established in the nation. On April 10, 1917, only four days after the declaration of war, the Minnesota senate voted unanimously to create the commission. The lower house followed suit four days later with only two dissenting votes: Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist signed the bill into law; and on April 23 the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety met for the first time.\(^2\)

Empowered to perform “all acts and things necessary or proper so that the military, civil and industrial resources of the state may be most efficiently applied toward maintenance of the defense of the state and nation, and toward the successful prosecution of such war,” the commission could do explicitly almost anything. It could seize or condemn property, require anyone to appear before it or its agents, demand that district courts issue subpoenas, examine the conduct of public officials, and advise the governor on actions against such officials.\(^3\)

The commission was headed by Governor Burnquist and Attorney General Lyndon A. Smith, a banker from Montevideo, who were ex officio members. The other members, all appointed by the governor, were Charles H. March, a lawyer and for a time vice-chairman, from Litchfield; John Lind of New Ulm, a three-term United States congressman (1887-93) and a past governor (1898-1900); John F. McGee, a former Minneapolis judge and attorney for the Chicago Great Western Railway; Charles W. Ames, general manager of the West Publishing Company which printed lawbooks; and Anton C. Weiss, a conservative Democrat and publisher of the Duluth Herald. John S. Pardee was chosen as secretary and Ambrose Tighe, the man who had drafted the enabling act for the legislature, as counsel. Commissioners served without salary and at the pleasure of the governor.\(^4\)

The commission addressed itself to problems in a wide area and issued 59 specific orders. These con-
cerned such war-related subjects as food production, marketing, labor and industrial peace, iron-ore output, fuel, the welfare of soldiers, prevention of waste, forest fires, and the price of milk. Each week the agency processed an average of 18 sacks of mail and answered 300 letters; it mailed more than 21,000 pieces of German-language literature to persons on its address lists. Over 700 state newspapers received from the commission English or foreign-language materials about the war and the efforts to win it, and between September 8, 1917, and December 28, 1918, the government body published and distributed its own official weekly newspaper, Minnesota in the War.

Frightened by pro-German sympathizers among the German element in Minnesota when the draft was initiated and the national guard mobilized, the Minnesota commission created its own army. Order No. 3 authorized seven Home Guard battalions, six of which were organized by July, 1917, with headquarters in St. Paul, Duluth, Virginia, Winona, Mankato, and Faribault. One year later there were 21 battalions. According to the order, "only able-bodied men between the ages of 31 and 52 inclusive, will be enlisted in the Home Guard of Minnesota; provided, however, that able-bodied men under 31 years of age may be enlisted when it is shown that they are probably exempt from service in the Federal Army."

These neighborhood soldiers trained somewhat regularly throughout the year and in September, 1918, held the first encampment for the motor division. One historian has argued that "The very organization of the home guard so dampened the ardor of German sympathizers that no overt acts of opposition took place and disloyal sentiments rarely found expression." As the socialist weekly, the Minneapolis New Times, predicted on April 14, 1917, the commission was at once able to "Prussianize Minnesota and establish here that military autocracy which we are supposed to be fighting in our war with Germany." 

SCHOLARS AND CRITICS have long questioned the necessity of a body like the Commission of Public Safety. Many, including some of its backers, judged the commission to be unconstitutional. The best rationale for its autonomy and dictatorial status was written by Ambrose Tighe, who clinched his argument with an analogy to the Minnesota Health Act of 1883 which provided that in the event of an epidemic, a board of health "shall do and provide all such acts, matters and things as may be necessary for mitigating or preventing the spread of any such disease." Minnesota residents with ancestral homes in the nations with which the United States was now at war were potentially "such a disease."

5GPS, Report, 13, 75n; Franklin F. Holbrook and Livia Appel, Minnesota in the War with Germany, 2:30 (St. Paul, 1932); Folwell, Minnesota, 3:319. An extension of the Home Guard was the Motor Corps, a paramilitary civilian group of car owners, founded by Winfield R. Stephens, a Minneapolis car dealer. It had 143 officers and 2,440 men. Between 6,373 and 10,000 men served in the Home Guard.

6Minnesota in the War, September 28, 1918, p. 5; Folwell, Minnesota, 3:318.

7Ambrose Tighe, "The Legal Theory of the Minnesota 'Safety Commission' Act," in Minnesota Law Review, 3:12 (December, 1918); Carol Jenson, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," in Minnesota History, 43:45 (Summer, 1972). A commission of public safety was first devised during the French Revolution when Le Comité de salut publique devoured "enemies of public safety" such as King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Georges Jacques Danton, and thousands of others.
aganda; (4) material eliciting admiration for German life; and (5) German patriotic poems.¹⁶

While the textbook committee was at work, Superintendent Schulz assembled further data and on November 6, 1917, informed the commission that during 1914–15 German had been taught as a subject in 198 of the state’s 221 high schools. A later survey of Stearns County in 1915 showed that 100 public, one-room schoolhouses used German for most of the day’s instruction, while ten used Norwegian and two Polish. But this was only the proverbial tip of the iceberg, the real problem lay in the private sector where in 1917 Schulz counted 307 parochial schools with a total enrollment of 38,853 pupils. Among these private institutions, less than one-third (94) were using English exclusively as the medium of instruction, nearly two-thirds (195) spoke German primarily, with occasional periods when the vehicle of instruction was English. A mere handful of schools — ten Polish, four French, and one each in Norwegian, Dutch, Danish, and Czech — represented all the other non-English languages in the state.³⁷

Superintendent Schulz was nevertheless reserved. Advising the commission that drastic action against these 195 schools was not warranted by the statistical evidence alone, he apparently slowed action by the commission. Instead of closing the schools, the agency resolved on November 20, 1917, “that school boards, principals and teachers be urged, as a patriotic duty, to require the use of the English language as the exclusive medium of instruction in all schools in the state of Minnesota, and to discontinue and prohibit the use of all foreign languages in such schools, except as a medium for the study of those languages themselves or as a medium of religious instruction.” The following April 30, 1918, the commission tightened the language screws indirectly with an order “that no person who is not a citizen of the United States shall be qualified to serve as a teacher in any public, private, or parochial school, or in any normal school in which teachers for these schools are trained.” To its credit, however, the commission never took the ultimate step of closing the German schools, private or public.

MEANWHILE the textbook committee, using the criteria listed above, had concluded its evaluation of the 270 titles used to teach German in the public schools. After several meetings with the committee, Superintendent Schulz told the commission on November 13 that 47 books had “a distinct German atmosphere” and 17 of these were “obnoxious to the public interests.” The longest list included 128 titles of a “literature type,” most of them “untainted by modern Prussian ideas,” the final group consisted of 46 volumes of stories which were judged mostly unobjectionable. Commissioner Ames summarized:

At this period in our national life, when the line is drawn so plainly between the Prussian ideal and the American ideal, it is clearly wrong and dangerous to permit instruction in the German language to awake, in the impressionable minds of our children, admiration and sympathy for the Prussian system of thought and government, and for the Hohenzollern family, the arch-enemies of mankind. For this reason, the curriculum of our public schools should be purged of all German text books which expert examination shows to be tainted with these false doctrines. There can be no question that some of these school books have been deliberately prepared as a part of the infamous German propaganda in the United States.³⁸

Upon the recommendation of Ames, the commission adopted the report and asked the textbook committee to reduce its findings to a “white list” of unobjectionable books, from which school boards may safely make their selections.” At a final session on November 23–24, 1917, the committee compiled Group A with 22 objectionable books and Group B with 238 titles which were unobjectionable except for a few incidentals — frequently the

¹⁶On the textbook committee, see original typescript in File 213, German Textbooks, CPS Records, CPS, Report of Special Committee on German Text Books Used in Public Schools of Minnesota, 3 (St. Paul, 1917). The report was written by Commissioner Ames. On the career and background of Schulz, see biographical sketch in Theodore Christianson, Minnesota. The Land of Sky-Tinted Waters. A History of the State and Its People, 4:589 (Chicago, 1935). For existing laws on the use of non-English languages in schools, see Minnesota, Laws Relating to the Public School System, 46 (St. Paul, 1901).
³⁸Here and below, see CPS, Report on German Text Books, 5, 6, 7.
The authors of the agency's final report, which spanned its official life from April 23, 1917, to December 31, 1918, justified its existence by explaining that nearly a quarter of the state's 2,000,000 residents were either German born or of German-Austrian parentage. They pointed out that there were "many sections . . . where the English language newspapers did not circulate, and where a foreign tongue was the medium of communication of church and school, in the home and in business relations." The commission's defenders argued further that although great numbers of foreign-born Minnesotans, including those of German blood, favored United States participation in the war, there were

many in Minnesota in 1917 who were not loyal in this sense. Some of them were traitors deserving of their fate which followed. . . . The public danger came when the anti-war feeling assumed the shape of concerted and public propaganda, and it assumed this shape here in the spring and summer of 1917. The Minnesota men who were disloyal in the sense above defined then formed a constituency of considerable size and there appeared leaders and spokesmen to organize them and give expression to their opinions. Misinterpreting the constitutional guaranty of freedom of speech and of the press, these leaders thought . . . that even in war times, they could properly oppose the government's policies in speech and writings.9

Among these leaders, the commissioners believed, were pacifists who organized a nationwide antiwar campaign; pro-German sympathizers who were conspicuous in the Minnesota River Valley and during the New Ulm antidraft rallies of July, 1917; and socialists and politicians of the Nonpartisan League stamp who pandered to antidraft rallies of July, 1917; and socialists and politicians of the Nonpartisan League stamp who pandered to treasonable sentiment in the population. One pacifist group that offended the commissioners was the nationally based People's Council for Democracy and Terms of Peace. Organized in New York during May, 1917, the council had gained notoriety for its role in drafting the St. Louis platform of the Socialist party which branded the declaration of war by the United States a crime. Opposed to conscription and any interference with the personal liberties of American citizens, the People's Council had an ardent following, particularly among Minnesota's German-stock population. According to the commission's final report, the city of Minneapolis was selected as the most suitable place in the nation for the council's first national convention. "The polyglot population of this state and section was looked upon as a promising soil by the sowers of sedition, and, moreover, the then mayor of Minneapolis had assured them of a most hospitable welcome and all needed protection."9

Planned for the first week in September, 1917, preparations for the convention received wide publicity. Special trains were chartered to bring leaders from the east to Minneapolis, and delegations were expected from many other parts of the nation. In the words of the commission, "The projected meeting was regarded not only as an overt act of sedition, but also as a blot upon the good name of the city." Vexed by the pacifist outpourings in the press and by repeated assurances of Minneapolis' Socialist mayor, Thomas Van Lear, Governor Burnquist wired the sheriff of Hennepin County ordering "that the holding of said convention and meetings within the county of Hennepin or elsewhere in the state of Minnesota be and the same is hereby prohibited."10

Other leaders whom the commission feared were German sympathizers in the Minnesota River Valley. On the evening of July 25, 1917, under the auspices of the People's Council, a meeting of 8,000 to 10,000 people was held in New Ulm's Turner Park, preceded by a parade through the streets of the city. Acting as marshal was County Auditor Louis G. Vogel, who subsequently mounted a platform adorned with American flags. There he was joined by Dr. Louis A. Fritsche, who served both as mayor of New Ulm and as vice-president of the Minnesota branch of the German American Alliance, the leading such organization in the nation; city attorney Albert Pfaender; Captain Albert Steinhauser, publisher of several German-language newspapers; and several others — including a local merchant and two faculty members of Dr. Martin Luther College, all of whom delivered speeches.11

The speeches as interpreted by the commission contained that war in defense of the nation was legitimate only on home soil; that Congress should be petitioned to send no American soldiers to European battlefields; and that everybody should join the People's Council on Democracy and Peace in order to bring about a constitutional amendment requiring a referendum for the declaration of war. The commission described the rally's purpose: "With a cunning, but futile effort to observe the letter of the law, while outraging its spirit, the speakers advised the drafted men to submit to the draft in form, expressed doubt as to whether they could, under

8CPS, Report, 31, 32. Minnesota had a total foreign-stock population of 71.5 per cent in 1910; of this 24.9 per cent were German. United States, Census, 1910, Population, 56, 836, 919.
9CPS, Report, 33, 34. A succinct account of the controversy is in Chrislock, Progressive Era, 138.
10CPS, Report, 49-51.
11Here and below, see CPS, Report, 49-51.
the constitution, be required to serve abroad. . . and criticized the war as unworthy of popular support.

The commission took stern steps against the officials of this Brown County community. They were removed from office, and the commission also brought pressure on the state bar association to disbar Pfaender and on the state medical association to revoke Fritsche's license to practice. Simultaneously, it induced the board of regents to remove another participant, Adolph Ackermann, as president of Dr. Martin Luther College after 24 years of service. Captain Steinhauser, a veteran of two American wars, was expelled by the Minnesota Editorial Association, and the American Legion of Mankato attempted to have his pension cancelled. John F. McGee presumably spoke for his fellow commissioners when he said to Pfaender, "You're a traitor and ought to be stood up against a wall and shot."  

Among political leaders whom the commission opposed were those associated with the Nonpartisan League and with Wisconsin's Senator Robert M. La Follette. Nor was the academic world immune to the agency's power. Such was the case for Dr. William A. Schaper, the American-born son of a German immigrant, who was summarily dismissed from the University of Minnesota by its board of regents. Schaper was informed on the afternoon of September 13, 1917, that he was to appear at a meeting of the regents that day and answer all questions put to him. Minutes after the interrogation began, Schaper was asked to resign as professor and chairman of the political science department. Since he refused to do so, he received a telegram the same evening from the regents terminating his relationship with the university. (In spite of this shabby treatment, Schaper, upon his death in 1955, bequeathed $10,000 of his estate to the University of Minnesota.)

A LITTLE-KNOWN FACET of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety's involvement with the German element in Minnesota concerned the use of German in the schools. It was the language much more than the country of origin which made German-speaking Americans the butt of suspicion and harassment. Whether the foreign-born citizens were from Switzerland, eastern

12 A copy of the official indictment sent by the commission to Governor Burnquist, August 28, 1917, is in CPS Records, File 212, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Minnesota State Archives, MHS. See also Minneapolis Morning Tribune, July 26, 1917, p. 1; New Ulm Review, August 1, 1917, p. 1; Martin H. Steffel, "New Ulm and World War I," unpublished master's thesis, Mankato State College, 1966; Charles Quimby, "German-Americans March in Protest: Don't Send Us to War against the Kaiser!" in Review (St. Cloud), July, 1975, pp. 16-18. On the Ackermann case, see "Indictment," addressed to trustees of the college, November 21, 1917; Tighe to trustees, January 2, 9, 24, 1918, G. E. Bergemann to Tighe, January 16, 30, 1918, all in File 136, Ambrose Tighe Correspondence, CPS Records.

13 On opposition to the Nonpartisan League, see, for example, Christlock, Progressive Era, 152, 162, 169, 173; Jenson, in Minnesota History, 43:43-57; Willis H. Raff, "Coercion and Freedom in a War Situation," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1957, copy in MHS. On the Schaper case, see University of Minnesota Board of Regents, Minutes, September 13, 1917, p. 29; other documents may be found in William W. Folwell Papers and Guy Stanton Ford Papers, University Archives, University of Minnesota.
France, Germany proper, Austria, or perhaps from the German-speaking colonies of southern Russia was of little consequence to the vengeful critics of 1917. The commission left no doubt that it intended to create "One Country, One Flag, One People and One Speech." Little effort was made to prevent the languages of allied and neutral, as well as alien, countries from coming under the ban. Since the most widespread non-English language commonly used in Minnesota schools during World War I was German, however, the commission was understandably disturbed. As early as May 21, 1917, Commissioner Ames interviewed Irish-born Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul about the advisability of eliminating German as a vehicle of instruction in Catholic schools. The archbishop urged caution, and thus the matter was tabled by the commission.

There the German-language school question lay until the September 12, 1917, meeting in which the Minnesota superintendent of education, Carl Gustav Schulz, with commission approval, recommended a committee to investigate the teaching of German in the public schools. (This action did not extend to the private schools which were considered beyond the jurisdiction of the state superintendent.) Advising that the study of German should not be suspended, Superintendent Schulz was authorized to appoint an eight-person committee to examine the German textbooks used in Minnesota. Reports from 350 elementary and secondary schools and from county superintendents listed the German texts in use, and from these the committee compiled 270 titles to investigate and determine which were "prejudicial to the interests of the United States, or contrary to those ideals of democracy which every liberty-loving nation wishes to inculcate in the hearts of the young." Five categories of material were carefully scrutinized: (1) pictures or insignia of the imperial family or the military; (2) the principle of "might makes right"; (3) German propaganda which were considered beyond the jurisdiction of the state superintendent.)

TYPICAL PROPAGANDA from the Public Safety Commission's weekly newspaper

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15Minnesota in the War, December 1, 1917, p. 1; CPS, Minutes, May 21, 1917, p. 47, Minnesota State Archives, MHS. Ireland's attitude is somewhat surprising because he had vigorously opposed German-language schools during the Cahensly controversy in the late 19th century and in his Faribault Plan in the 1890s. See La Vern J. Rippley, The German-Americans, 121 (Boston, 1976).
aganda; (4) material elicting admiration for German life; and (5) German patriotic poems. While the textbook committee was at work, Superintendent Schulz assembled further data and on November 6, 1917, informed the commission that during 1914-15 German had been taught as a subject in 198 of the state’s 221 high schools. A later survey of Stearns County in 1915 showed that 100 public, one-room schoolhouses used German for most of the day’s instruction, while ten used Norwegian and two Polish. But this was only the proverbial tip of the iceberg; the real problem lay in the private sector where in 1917 Schulz counted 307 parochial schools with a total enrollment of 38,853 pupils. Among these private institutions, less than one-third (94) were using English exclusively as the medium of instruction; nearly two-thirds (195) spoke German primarily, with occasional periods when the vehicie of instruction was English. A mere handful of schools — ten Polish, four French, and one each in Norwegian, Dutch, Danish, and Czech — represented all the other non-English languages in the state.

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Upon the recommendation of Ames, the commission adopted the report and asked the textbook committee to reduce its findings to a “white list” of unobjectionable books, from which school boards may safely make their selections.” At a final session on November 23-24, 1917, the committee compiled Group A with 22 objectionable books and Group B with 238 titles which were unobjectionable except for a few incidents — frequently the

16 On the textbook committee, see original typescript in File 213, German Textbooks, CPS Records, CPS, Report of Special Committee on German Text Books Used in Public Schools of Minnesota, 3 (St. Paul, 1917). The report was written by Commissioner Ames. On the career and background of Schulz, see biographical sketch in Theodore Christianson, Minnesota: The Land of Sky-Tinted Waters. A History of the State and Its People, 4:589 (Chicago, 1935). For existing laws on the use of non-English languages in schools, see Minnesota, Laws Relating to the Public School System, 46 (St. Paul, 1901).
18 Here and below, see CPS, Report on German Text Books, 5, 6, 7.
cover design. Ames remarked on the committee’s common sense in not purging two patriotic German songs, “Deutschland über Alles” and “Die Wacht am Rhein,” both written long ago with other purposes in mind. Ames urged that teachers employ these songs to point out how they had become the watchwords of a “Teutonic world empire which had drenched the world with blood,” thus exemplifying the “full significance of the Prussianizing of German thought.” Cautioning that there may have been other books not examined by the committee which should have been placed with Group A, the state education department published and distributed both lists.

In the manuscript version of the report, books by Paul V. Bacon were singled out for special condemnation — particularly one entitled Im Vaterland. A close examination to understand what made this book anathema reveals pictures of the imperial family on three pages, and on two pages, with dialogue about the German army, are pictures of a parade and some German officers in a guardhouse. The entire book describes episodes of an American nephew’s visit to his uncle in Germany to learn about life in that nation. There was precious little glorification of German life. For example, the nephew finds that he cannot visit a German classroom and remarks that in America such visits were common practice. The pictured classroom is not complimentary to the German stereotype of discipline. When discussing the army, the uncle tells about his mandatory year in the army but comments that “it was uninteresting. The soldiers usually spend their time in a camp, undergo strict discipline, get simple, though enough, food to eat, learn how to handle a rifle, have target practice and hear a lot about the methods of making war.” Innocuous as this may seem, Commissioner Ames nevertheless wrote in the unpublished version of the report: “They are so evidently prepared as a part of the German propaganda that I think that every German book written or edited by Paul V. Bacon might properly be banned from the schools on general principles.”

Some contemporary German teachers in the Minneapolis public schools were puzzled by the proscription of the Bacon book. One group pointed out to the Board of Education that Im Vaterland “was a book written by an American, having a two-fold purpose, that of furnishing easy German reading for beginners and to give a knowledge and atmosphere of German life and feeling.” Nevertheless, they agreed to co-operate fully with the Safety Commission.

SOMETIMES the question of German in the schools was not simply left to the commission but was debated hotly in local chambers, on the streets, and in meetings of boards of education. In Minneapolis, the state’s largest school system, for example, the question of the German language was argued at a special meeting of the city board of education. To accommodate representatives of the Parent-Teachers Association and the citizenry, the meeting was called for Saturday, September 12, 1917, at 10 A.M.

Interestingly enough, school board member Henry Deutsch, after first announcing his German birth, launched a vituperative tirade against Germany. “I doubt that there has been a single movement made or authorized or approved by the German Government, or anybody connected with it — and particularly those who have been tied up with its educational departments — that has ever lost sight of, for one instant, the ultimate . . . of elevating the German Autocracy to the highest pinnacle of admiration and adoration. if we could get the motives back of even these text books, we would find that it was promoted with that same predominant idea of German supremacy.”

With more equilibrium, board member David F. Swenson pleaded for tolerance. “I believe we should not require . . . a teacher of the German language, who is perhaps herself German born, or of German parentage . . . to be loud or violently open in her expression of loyalty. What we need to expect in such a case is, that if she still has feelings of sympathy and can not help it, she suppress those feelings as far as school-room instruction is concerned.” But Deutsch shot back, “We should not have subjects of the German Emperor employed in our school, and teaching our children and drawing money paid by tax payers of this country.”

Representatives of the PTA and several citizens lined up about equally on both sides of the German language question. Referring to Im Vaterland, one said: “I have not the slightest doubt but that Mr. Paul V. Bacon was paid a large bonus out of the German treasury for getting that book into the American schools.” Another, admitting he could not read German, commented nevertheless: “I see in this book quite a demonstration of swords; quite an array of Military formation.” A third argued more logically that “it would be a great mistake to take a hasty step and abolish the teaching of German.”

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19 File 213, in CPS Records, MHS; Paul V. Bacon, Im Vaterland, 3, 9, 77, 79 (Boston, 1910). Bacon, a Harvard graduate, joined his father’s publishing house in 1913, became editor-in-chief, and stayed with the firm until 1947.

20 Hermine R. Koenig, R. J. Schulz, and Susan Heffernan to Minneapolis Board of Education, September 15, 1917, in File 184, Department of Education, CPS Records. Biographical data obtained from Bacon’s publisher indicates he had no strong affinity for Germany but rather careful scholarship “To make sure that the book is a faithful picture of German life.”

21 Here and four paragraphs below, see Minneapolis Morning Tribune, September 15, 16, 1917, both on p. 1; and minutes of the meeting, copy in File 184, CPS Records.
2. Die Kaiserliche Familie.

"Hast du den Kaiser schon gesehen, Justin Karl?"

"Natürlich, Herr. Hier in Berlin kann man ihn häufig sehen."

"Wann hast du ihn zuletzt gesehen?"

"Am Regierungsantritt, als er mit seiner hohen Zucht in die Kirche ging."

"Hat denn der Kaiser keine Tochter?"

"Ja wohl, und auch noch eine Tochter."

"Wie heißen sie alle?"

"Der älteste, der Kronprinz, heißt Friedrich Viktor, der zweite, Otto, und die dritte, Albert. Aber alle diese Namen sind doch nur rein."

"Und sind sie alle belaubt?"

"Ich meine, ich sehe keine blumen, besonders seit seiner Rückkehr der ganzen nächsten Zeit."

"Das war es, denn er war wegen seiner Seeleute im Kriege sehr beliebt, und wegen seiner Seeleute, er war der weisste Kaiser."

"Warum ist der weisste Kaiser gestorben?"

THESE PAGES from Im Vaterland were among those that offended the guardians of Americanism. Above, left, the Kaiser's family; right, German royalty greeting the military; below, a parade in Berlin.
should be at war for ten or fifteen or even twenty years, all the more reason that we should have as much insight as possible, and be able to read German and follow them in the method in which they take themselves and the rest of the world.” Other citizens astutely observed that the material in the books ought to have been taught 20 years ago so that in 1914 Americans would have had a better understanding of the intentions of the German government.

In the end, surprisingly, the Minneapolis Board of Education, upon the recommendation of Superintendent Bennett B. Jackson, passed a resolution that school authorities keep the German language matter under strict surveillance but did not vote to eliminate either its own list of textbooks or the teaching of German as such. Only member Alex G. Bainbridge thought the board should at least temporarily halt the teaching of German in Minneapolis.

Precedents had been set in other states. Iowa, South Dakota, and Missouri, for example, took stringent measures against the use of the German language. The Minnesota Public Safety Commission never went that far. Instead of a prohibitive order, it passed a resolution on November 20, 1917, in which school administrations and teachers were urged to require the use of English as the exclusive medium of instruction. There may not have been much difference between the de jure and de facto results (namely, the disappearance of bilingualism from American life), but at least in this one respect Minnesota was not the most repressive of the state councils.22

THE TEXTBOOK ISSUE generated only moderate correspondence after the list of banned books was distributed late in 1917. Consequently, the commission in March, 1918, sent a questionnaire to all schools to find out what action had been taken. Commissioner Ames, apparently under the assumption that the distribution of Groups A and B lists was having little effect, recommended on March 26, 1918, approval of an order “prohibiting outright the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction in all schools in Minnesota after a date fixed by the commission,” probably at the opening of the fall term. But the matter was tabled until the results of the questionnaire could be received. These arrived on May 17, 1918, showing that 93 of the 551 schools which had been using texts in Group A had discarded the books; 30 schools had eliminated the objectionable parts; 25 had voluntarily discontinued German; and 34 planned to eliminate it after the close of the school year. Presumably the rest of the schools had already been safely operating with books listed on Group B. Satisfied with these results, the commission repeatedly delayed the Ames proposal for an outright ban of German from the schools. A newly drafted proposal submitted by Superintendent Schulz was repeatedly postponed. As a result no tougher anti-German language resolution was forthcoming from the Minnesota Public Safety Commission.23

DURING the academic year 1917–18 the commission received many letters urging the elimination of the German schools, the language, or both. Most of them originated within the state, but some were from without. The foreign editor of a Wisconsin newspaper, for example, suggested that “German language study should be deferred because of the danger that children are liable to, from the insidious propaganda which German teachers are known to have carried on.”24

From the cross section of incidents with which the commission dealt, many were school related. The Minnesota Education Association, for example, urged inspection and supervision of all state and parochial schools to assure that all elementary instruction “be in the American language,” and presumably looked to the commission for implementation of the resolution. Early in 1918, citizens of New Auburn banded together into a “Loyal Service League” whose intended service was elimination of the German language schools. To the state commission they sent a “factual” resolution which asserted: (1) that the German parochial schools bar patriotism; (2) that such schools are under the domination of the German ministers in the communities and that they “are progerman [sic] to the core” and “espouse the cause of Kaiserism...in a secret and cowardly manner which makes it all the harder to neutralize”; (3) that pupils in the German parochial schools were not taught to revere the flag; (4) that these schools fostered “Little Germanies” and therefore the Loyal Service League wanted all of them to use English and come under closer surveillance.25

Aided by the National Council of Defense, the Minnesota commission went to great lengths to generate patriotism. Rather overzealous in this category were the Teachers’ Patriotic Leagues which by March, 1918, existed in 50 Minnesota counties. Each teacher in these counties was directed to organize Little Citizens’ Leagues which officially enrolled over 60,000 Minnesota children under the auspices of the public schools.

But loyalty leagues among the teachers and pupils were never fully adequate without the special investiga-
ing agent in the field. In March, for instance, N. I. Lowry was dispatched by the commission to assess an anti-German student strike at Elk River. In his report Lowry wrote: “The trouble seems to have started over the use of banned German textbooks in the schools. The students refused to study the German language at all and had requested that they be given a half year’s credit and permission to drop the study of the language. This idea was opposed by the School Board as well as the faculty. There were 56 striking students.” Closer scrutiny reveals that local politics was a more serious factor than German textbooks. A certain Frank White had organized the student strike as a way of getting back at Andrew Davis, the commission’s director of safety in Sherburne County and also a member of the school board. White accused Davis of tepidity toward Liberty Bonds, but when Lowry appeared on behalf of the state commission, Davis hastened to reassure him that the students had returned to their classes.26

Other schools had larger problems with German sympathizers in the classroom. Accusations were made in April, 1918, against Irene Bremer, a teacher in School District 9 of Wabasha County near Lake City. In the Bremer case, pupils aged 11, 12, and 15 charged in an affidavit that Miss Bremer had said “Germany is the greatest country in the world.” Allegedly she also claimed “Every country but England is ready to sign the peace treaty.” Affiants attested that Miss Bremer had permitted the children in her school to argue whether President Wilson or the Kaiser were the better man. School board member Elmer Nygren signed an affidavit that he would not allow his six-year-old child to learn from this pro-German teacher. Another parent described how Irene Bremer had taken a Red Cross pin from a boy who had paid for it, giving it to another of German parentage who had not paid for it nor even assisted in the sale of Thrift Stamps.27

The safety commission referred the sworn testimony to Superintendent Schulz, who (although Miss Bremer had meantime resigned) laid down four stipulations: (1) Miss Bremer’s certificate to teach in the state be suspended; (2) she attend Winona Normal School for six weeks and give evidence of her loyalty to the president and her instructors, upon which her certification would be reinstated; (3) thereafter she was to teach patriotism and loyalty and support the war aims in school; and (4) upon complaint, her certificate was subject to revocation permanently. In the Bremer case, as many times before, Carl Schulz was a voice of moderation: “I do not feel her offence warrants the permanent revocation of her certificate for the period of the war.”

IF CHARGES against individual teachers were at times exaggerated, so were the continuing allegations about German textbooks. On July 31, 1918, the Winona Republican-Herald ran large headlines declaring: “GERMAN TEXTBOOK TEACHING GERMAN PROPAGANDA IS FOUND IN WINONA PUBLIC SCHOOLS.” Subheadlines continued, “Prof. J. M. Holzinger Denounces Volume and Writes to Minnesota Public Safety Commission — Urges Investigation of All Textbooks and Elimination of Dangerous Matter.” Apparently the German and Polish stronghold of Winona and its newspapers had not studied the commission’s German textbook list of the previous December. Without reference to the commission’s A and B lists, Holzinger found a particular book by Philip Schuyler Allen, an associate professor of German at the University of Chicago, to be “well written and excellent in literary technique. The propaganda is all the more dangerous because of the fact that it is so unobtrusive and apparently innocent.” Aroused Winona citizens called for action. “Let the board of education order an immediate investigation of the textbooks now in use here and rigidly exclude everything that is not pre-eminently pro-American,” wrote one. “Let parochial schools fall in line and do the same thing. Clean up the text books before the schools reopen a month hence.” Endorsing this call to arms, the Winona paper affirmed that “the schools of Menominee, Michigan, excluded all German books. The students gathered the discarded volumes together and burned them publicly at a great patriotic demonstration.”28

Fortunately Minnesotans were never obliged to burn their books publicly, but the hysteria over the German language in the schools came within inches of barbarism. One Ottertail citizen wrote to the commission that the largest ethnic group in his area were the Germans. “They have started a school of their own beside their church about a mile and a half from town. Before the war they had school in their ‘private german’ school house for three or four months, which almost ruined the American public school. Now they propose to have a school by the Germans and for the Germans during the whole school


27Here and below, see Schulz to Libby, June 28, 1918; Schulz to H. V. Frick, May 27, 1918; Libby to Schulz, June 13, 1918, all in File 184, CPS Records. The incident seems never to have been covered by local newspapers. The general climate of opinion in the area expressed in the Standard (Wabasha), November 29, 1917, p. 2, called for exclusive use of English in schools.

28Philip S. Allen, German Life: A Cultural Reader for the First Year (New York, 1914).
year thus the American school will be almost killed. . . The conditions around Ottertail will bear investigation. . . I stand for America first last & all the time. But it would be a blessing to us few Americans in and around Ottertail if this German school could be knocked in the head.”

With comparable zeal, the mayor of Stillwater wrote to the commission, “I wish to bring to your attention the fact that in our city we still have two schools where German is the principal language being taught.” The mayor’s attention had been drawn to the city’s German schools by an incident in which a local mother blamed the deficient performance of her young son in the public system on language. She wrote to his public school teacher, “I have considered the matter and come to the conclusion that I would take him out of the public school and send him to German School.” It is not known how this and many similar cases were eventually resolved, but it can be assumed that all of them were somehow painful.

IF THE OPPRESSED looked for quick relief after the armistice had been signed on November 11, 1918, they were disappointed, for the Minnesota commission kept up its pace to the end of its existence. One instance occurred in December when Dr. O. E. Strickler of New Ulm wanted to donate $1,000 to the local board of education to establish the “Emilie Strickler-Doehne Memorial Fund,” the proceeds of which were to be used “for the purpose of stimulating the study of modern languages.” Defenders of the proposal noted that the money would be used for the teaching of Spanish. Swiftly opponents of foreign languages in the schools rose to the attack. A former mayor of St. Paul, Daniel W. Lawler, wrote to Commissioner McGee, asserting that he had “considerable knowledge about the extent of German propaganda in all the South American countries. . . Chile is practically a German annex. My attention was struck by the unexplained circumstance that a poor man of well-known German sympathies living in such a hotbed of treason as New Ulm should cold turkey donate a thousand dollars apparently for altruistic purposes. If there is anything in the belief that Germany looks far ahead especially in establishing commercial supremacy, it would be a very good investment for it to train Americans in Spanish and have them represent Germany in South American countries.” In the face of such opposition, Dr. Strickler relinquished his support for foreign languages and stipulated instead that the fund’s earnings be used to purchase books of fiction. Only then was the New Ulm Board of Education authorized by the commission to accept the donation.

Even after the Public Safety Commission ceased activities, complaints kept arriving. Typical was a letter from Pope County regarding the German school at Villard. As it had done many times before, the department of education responded, “This office has no authority or control over private schools. Our law permits such schools to operate without any particular restrictions. The only existing restriction is the order of the Safety Commission recommending that English be used as the medium of instruction in all schools, both public and private, except their religious instruction, or instruction in some foreign language.”

With Germany defeated and the German language in Minnesota schools routed, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety had lost much of its raison d’être. It met only a few times after December 15, 1918, and when the legislature convened in January, 1919, it did not extend the life of the agency. On February 4, 1919, therefore, the powerful, highly efficient body rescinded its orders except those providing for the Home Guard and for peace officers.

AMBROSE TIGHE, legal counsel to the Commission

Ambrose Tighe had argued that not even the signs of rebellion or sedition were necessary for the commission to take action. Directives pertaining to the German language and those who spoke it, therefore, were considered preventive measures rather than remedial. It was a classic case of the state claiming rights which it held to be vastly superior to the rights of individuals guaranteed under the Constitution. The fact that the nation was at war was presumed by the members of the commission to
be a circumstance which abrogated the rights of individuals. According to the final report: "The Commission aimed to make malfeactors generally realize that many things which in peace times would be insignificant were serious in war times."

The members of the agency did not "regard the Constitution as so delicate a document that its pages will be soiled or torn by a little rough usage, while battles are raging." Tighe believed the commission's only weakness to be "its departure from the principle of constitutional government." Governor Burnquist, writing in 1924, explained the public safety agency in a matter-of-fact way without justification. He expressed gratitude that 200,000 aliens had been registered by the commission and that naturalization was given a boost, but he offered no evaluation of the civil rights which the commission may have violated. After the war, the governor never retracted his firm belief that the German language was an unfit tongue for an American citizen. Strongly supportive of Americanization programs in Minnesota, Burnquist maintained that "No one should have a right to make a living in this country, or exercise the electoral franchise in this state, unless he is willing to learn its language."  

Senator La Follette, seditious. After all, the league was at that very time in political control of North Dakota, which co-operated completely with the federal government's war aims.  

On balance, the commission's drive against the German language was tempered by a few individuals, notably Superintendent Schulz, a son of Swedish immigrants, and Swedish-born Commissioner John Lind, who resigned from his post in January, 1918, in protest over the necktie-party tactics of Commissioner McGee. Thus, there were three Swedes, including Governor Burnquist, at the heart of power — two of whom were on the side of moderation in dealing with the German language question as it was orchestrated by the Commission of Public Safety in Minnesota.

In the final analysis, however, the German-language question in Minnesota was never viewed on its own merits. The language served as a focal point of a larger, more disguised animosity. Most instances of trouble over the German language in the schools were caused by nativist elements in the society, trying desperately to assert their control over education; in the process they believed it necessary to kill the German language because it was a major factor rigidly separating the private from the public schools.  

In many of the Catholic parochial schools of Minnesota the German language had long been under attack by Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul. His plan for Amer-

35 CPS. Report, 9, CPS, Minutes, September, 1917, p. 175.  
36 New Ulm was a case in point in with a fairly homogeneous German population that was divided almost equally among Catholics, Lutherans, and free-thinking Turners. See Noel Iverson, Germania, U.S.A.: Social Change in New Ulm, Minnesota (Minneapolis, 1966).
Americanization of the Catholic schools of Minnesota began in 1891 and persisted, though in muted form, until his death on September 25, 1916. Similarly, in Catholic Stearns County, Austrian-born Bishop Josef F. Busch, who might have been friendly toward the German language, had served as a secretary and personal friend of Archbishop Ireland and was wholly sympathetic to the distinguished churchman’s views. Consequently he ordered that English replace German in the local schools, arguing, as had Ireland, “if the foreign-born Catholics of this district neglect to have their children learn English, the Catholic Church will be charged with fostering hyphenism or un-Americanism.” The people of Stearns County tried to operate German public schools, but Busch ordered them to build English parochial schools.

Frequently business competition was interwoven with the language question and resulted in anti-German pressure. It was all too easy for non-German competitors to exploit the Public Safety Commission’s suspicions. Contrary to what might be assumed, it was often the better educated who were the most anti-German and who knew best how to manipulate skillfully the forces of the commission against the German element for their own advantage. Thus Brown County merchants, bankers, and lawyers were instrumental in the denunciation of the New Ulm officials. Newspaper publishers and doctors sometimes joined clergymen in agitating against their competitive German neighbors. Younger pastors, be they Lutheran or Catholic, were sometimes less than comfortable with the German language and welcomed the commission’s anti-Germanism as the lever they needed to pry their elderly faithful away from their mother tongue. Irish Catholics, under the guise of obedience to their bishops, gladly campaigned to Americanize Minnesota’s German Catholics. Streaking through all of this behavior was a sense of loyalty and patriotism which had become canonized by the reality of war. Patriotism, epitomized by the sanctimonious dictum “right or wrong, my country,” was easily marshaled by the commission among the majority citizen groups of Minnesotans. But minority groups as well as individuals found no protection under the commission’s umbrella, especially if they spoke the alien German language.


It is ironic that in 1980 the Congress of the United States struggled to understand the implications of a report filed by the Presidential Commission on Foreign Languages in America. The report bemoaned the lack of interest in non-English language study, but nowhere did it plumb the complicated depths of the foreign-language debacle that swept the nation under the banner of loyalty and dedicated Americanism during 1917–18. Insight into this darker side of the nation’s psyche might result from a hard look at Minnesota’s Commission of Public Safety and its behavior toward Germans in Minnesota.