

**Spies Among Us:
German-Americans in Wisconsin During World War I**

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Abstract

World War I was a time of concern both abroad and domestically for the United States. With the US entering into the conflict in 1917, this also brought about the limiting of personal freedoms on the home front with the legislation of the Espionage and Sedition Acts being implemented. The state of Wisconsin was under a microscope all on its own as it was a hub for German and Austrian immigrants during the second wave of immigration. With this came a fear of espionage in the state, and thus a growth in investigation within the state. This research plans to look at how the state was studied and investigated during this time with a focus on the case of Paul Von Szeliski who was a resident of Madison, WI during this period and has numerous documents out on him, talking about investigating his whereabouts and what he is doing during this time to make sure he isn't involved in espionage for the German state.

Introduction

“This is the first personal contact Agent has had with this man. Agent’s judgement is that von Szeliski must be very carefully watched... he has all the looks and appearance of a dangerous Pro-German character.”¹ Paul von Szeliski was a resident of Madison, WI during the Great War, and without ever knowing him you might think he was just your typical German immigrant. However, during the war years a fear of espionage and Pro-German dissent was a cause for concern in the Justice Department. This gave the department a reason to look into the life of an individual with the appearance of an everyday life, but was he possibly hiding something more?

Not an uncommon feature of this time, the Justice Department looked into thousands of cases of German immigrants or those of German descent in order to try and snuff out spies in the states. Through legislation passed by the federal government that often went unnoticed by the civilian population, the rights of American citizens began to become more restricted as the phrase “freedom of speech” was reduced. It could be argued that it was taken away almost entirely by certain groups.² This became very prevalent in Wisconsin which had a large German heritage throughout the state and so was questioned throughout the country with worry about loyalties as well as going against the United States’ interest in terms of going to war.

The cases and causes for looking into the lives of these immigrants and those feared to be spies for the German military came out of the legislation known as the Espionage Act of 1917 as well as the furthering of these limitations through the Sedition Act of 1918. This legislation was passed in order to limit the voices of the people throughout the United States by making it illegal

¹ Paul Von Szeliski, Investigative Records Relating to German Aliens (“Old German Files”), 1915-1920, Record Group 65, Entry 31, National Archives, Washington D.C.

² James R. Mock, *Censorship 1917* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1941), 40.

to speak out against the actions of the United States military, while also limiting the abilities of citizens to show their pride for the enemy country.³ This was the first time that the American government had changed its tune on “the emphasis in American thinking from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to subordination of the feelings and desires of the individual to the winning of a war.”⁴ The United States government at the time started to show its true colors towards its citizens as it made the argument that the safety of the country, and the limiting of freedoms was more important during the war years than it was the happiness of the individual citizens that inhabited the country. This is a very important moment in history as there were other movements such as women’s suffrage and issues that arose with prohibition which had made significant strides up to this point. These movements were put on the backburner for the pro-war sentiment which became the most important aspect of American society.

Looking into Wisconsin, and the case of Paul von Szeliski, it is pretty clear to see that the United States had Wisconsin as one of its main focuses throughout the war years on the home front. With fear of a Pro-German sentiment being a concern as well as thoughts of Espionage being prevalent in the state due to its larger German population, and the different communities this caused issues for the United States during the period.

Historiography

There have been many works of scholarship that surround the topic of German-Americans during the first World War, while there are also some that focus specifically on the state of Wisconsin. The topic of the Espionage and Sedition Acts and the ways that the rights of

³ James R. Mock, *Censorship 1917*, 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

speech and press were limited during these years have also been pretty extensively researched. In all, there are numerous works that help with this topic in looking into the ways that the United States looked at Wisconsin and how they went about testing the issues of loyalty and fear of dissent throughout the state. What is really interesting is a lot of the works of scholarship spread all throughout the twentieth-century, while also some coming from the twenty-first. So, it is a wide timeline that offers a look at the period closer to the war years, and how those of today reflect on a similar topic.

The first text published back in 1939 is that of Clifton James Child and his work on *The German-Americans in Politics 1914-1917*. This text looks into the political climate of the war years in the state of Wisconsin as well as a broader scope of the country. He is “concerned merely with the group as such, with its reactions to the war in Europe and to neutrality at home... possibly conflicting loyalties, and its vicissitudes in the face of the growing resentment and intolerance of other sections of communities.”⁵ It offers a wide variety of different issues that faced the German-American community and goes into detail on some of the political battles that occurred during the election years of the conflict. An interesting tidbit on the battle with President Woodrow Wilson who tried his best to silence the group politically during the 1916 election cycle, while the ethnic group did their best to try and force him out of office.

Next is a look at James R. Mock’s text *Censorship 1917* which looks at just that, America’s brief history of censoring its citizens and how it expanded coming into the war period. The United States government put on the citizens of the country during these years with a focus on the Espionage and Sedition Acts. He says how “the main purpose of this volume is to show the extent to which the First Amendment to the Constitution was set aside during the greatest

⁵ Clifton James Child, *The German-Americans in Politics 1914-1917* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1939), iii.

crisis through which this nation has passed up to present time.”⁶ Throughout his text he looks into the many different ways that the citizens of the country were limited during these war years. Looking at the different ways that people were limited through banning books, movies and symbols, as well as how all of these laws were put into place in the first place.

Clifford L. Nelson has a text similar to that of Child, but his work is much more geographically focused. Nelson writes on the topic of *German-American Political Behavior in Nebraska and Wisconsin 1916-1920*. His objective is to “analyze the impact of the war on the political behavior of German-Americans in Nebraska and Wisconsin.”⁷ The text is more of an analysis of what happened to German-Americans in the more German centered communities of the United States. Again, the focus of the text on the election years in the states, and how the states went about trying to oppose the joining of the war in Europe. It also looks into the aftermath of the decision of the war at the closing of Wilson’s second term in office and how it impacted the states that were discussed.

Following this comes Frederick C. Luebke’s *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* which tries to “explain why American society lashed out at its German element during World War I... [as] the crisis of war did not by itself create conflicts between the native-born and the German-Americans. Rather, war was the occasion that converted latent tensions into manifest hostility.”⁸ The monograph looks into different cases throughout the war as well as some leading up to the United States’ involvement in Europe. The focus being on the German-

⁶ James R. Mock, *Censorship 1917*, vii.

⁷ Clifford L. Nelson, *German-American Political Behavior in Nebraska and Wisconsin 1916-1920* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Publication, 1972), 3.

⁸ Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), xii.

American community and the response they had to the war years, as well as the countries response to the actions of those who lived in the US.

Making way into a text of the twenty-first century comes William H. Thomas Jr.'s *Unsafe for Democracy: World War I and the U.S. Justice Department's Covert Campaign to Suppress Dissent*. This text deals very closely with the topic at hand, as the discussion of the justice department and the focus on the German-American community are at the forefront for both the book as well as my own topic. The text is a very in-depth study into the country during the war years with the focus being on the Homefront. Very beneficial to my own research a whole chapter dealing with the state of Wisconsin is in the text as the chapter on "Policing Wisconsin" helps to look into the causes of concern from the state. As well as how its communities looked to fight against the federal government over the topic of war and suppression of personal freedoms.⁹

Lastly is Richard L. Pifer's text *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin* which is an in-depth text looking at the Homefront of Wisconsin during the war years. He writes how "this book endeavors to capture the essence of the home-front experience: the debates over the nations entry into the war, the patriotic fervor felt by most people once the war began, the worry experienced when loved ones went to fight 'over there,' the political debates about war policy, and the impact of the wartime hysteria that drove most dissent underground."¹⁰ The book is a close look into the state that had a lot of concern surrounding it during the war years and looks very closely into

⁹ William H. Thomas Jr., *Unsafe for Democracy: World War I and the U.S. Justice Department's Covert Campaign to Suppress Dissent* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 110.

¹⁰ Richard L. Pifer, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin: Sacrifice, Patriotism, and Free Speech in a Time of Crisis* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), 1.

some of the lives of citizens around the state. While also looking at how the war impacted the state itself throughout the war years, and the years leading up to the conflict in Europe.

These texts all offer a good in-depth study into not only the state of Wisconsin during the war years, but also the reactions of the entire United States and its response to the citizens that were strongly represented in the state of Wisconsin. On top of these secondary sources, a good list of primary sources can be used in explaining the story of what occurred not only in Wisconsin during this period but throughout the entire US in trying to find spies and those individuals who could potentially cause any trouble for the US government. This is where we get into the story of Paul von Szeliski who gives a name and face to a specific case of the department of justice investigating specific German-Americans throughout the war.

German-Americans and Wisconsin

As part of the second wave of immigration the US saw a large influx of German immigrants sail over to try and develop new and better lives for themselves and their families. Throughout the generations, the growth of a German-American community became prominent as do with all other immigrant groups throughout the United States' history. In 1914 the first World War broke out. One that at the time was called "the Great War" as it was on a scale to the likes of which the world had never seen before. With this brought about a concern of the German-American and German immigrant community as they were seen as the enemy of the United States' allies in the conflict. With a large German population in the state of Wisconsin, it became a hub for questions of loyalty and nationalism during the war period.

In 1910, 28% of the state was made up of first and second generation German immigrants.¹¹ With over a quarter of the state being made up of the enemy group, questions of loyalty began to arise throughout the states and a fear of espionage became prevalent. This fear brought about numerous investigations within the state as different departments looked into certain individuals who they feared might be involved with spying within the country and sending information back home to Germany or what was then Austria-Hungary. With these large numbers of people who were associated with the enemy of the states, the political climate of the United States and the state of Wisconsin really was at the forefront as the war was fought over a period of presidential elections within the US.

Wisconsin at the time was represented in the Senate by former Governor of the state Robert M. La Follette. Known for his progressive politics he played a big role during this period in expanding on progressive ideals like workers' rights and sanitation reform. However, as the war in Europe started to expand, he couldn't justify the United States entering the conflict overseas. Trying to play to his state and its large pro-German alignment he had tried to play spoiler in the senate by trying to build support to vote against expanding the US's role overseas. He became the center of attention by organizing a filibuster in Congress over a supposed bill being passed called the Armed Ship Bill which would have expanded arms on merchant ships that the US was sending to Europe in order to protect the products. La Follette saw this as an expansion of the US involvement in the war however and thus requested a group of loyalists to fight against the bill.¹² Over the course of this filibuster, tensions ran high and the concern over physical harm to La Follette was the cause for concern, but in all the filibuster turned into a great

¹¹ Clifford L. Nelson, *German-American Political Behavior in Nebraska and Wisconsin 1916-1920*, 3.

¹² Richard L. Pifer, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin*, 56-57.

moral victory for La Follette and the loyalists in the senate.¹³ Although this filibuster turned out to be all for naught as Wilson “concluded that he didn’t need congressional authority to arm merchant vessels after all.”¹⁴

This incident really put a light on the state of Wisconsin as well as now the States are not sure how loyal those in government are to the US as opposed to their old fatherland. In order for the state to try and move away from this negative image that was created over these congressional debates, organizations were created in order to try and satisfy the conformity that the United States was looking for from Wisconsin.¹⁵ The states newspapers began to “reflect the hatred of everything German which swept across the nation. With few exceptions the dominant reaction was to wipe out every vestige of German influence in the nation.”¹⁶ Though difficult for over a quarter of the state to admit, they were forced to put aside their true feelings in order to put on an act of patriotism towards the United States in order to show that loyalty in the state was not going to be an issue.

With the policing of the state and looking to rid it of its pro-German sentiment, the growth of loyalists became a problem for the US within Wisconsin, as some citizens were not willing to rid themselves of the pride they held for their home country. The development of a Wisconsin Loyalty Legion grew out of some of the residents who were not willing to suppress their old customs and German lifestyle that the newspapers were requesting them to. The legion

¹³ Richard L. Pifer, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin.*, 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ Clifford L. Nelson, *German-American Political Behavior*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

was formed in order to “give voice to the militant loyalists of the state”¹⁷ This was not the only group formed out of this and was not the only voice that was heard by the people of the state. In an editorial column of the Wisconsin State Journal, a loyalist wrote how all German-Americans should “pledge again and again their devotion to their country and its ideals. Their isolation and their estrangement will cease, and they will be children to their father’s house.”¹⁸ Their father’s house meaning their homeland of Germany, which shows that this man truly feels a spirit of loyalty to his home land and feels as though everyone with some connection to it should be on the side of the “enemy”. This is a bold editorial as well, with the laws put in place by the government to not speak out against the United States, an article like this could really hurt the individual who wrote this piece.

As one could probably guess, the state of Wisconsin and the majority ethnic residents of the state felt pretty strongly about then President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had instigated his way into a conflict which Wisconsin was against. As well he did his best to suppress the rights and liberties of this group throughout the country. This grew a disdain for the president who was up for reelection in 1916. Nelson writes in his text how “Wilson, according to the German-American perspective, had insisted that none of the rights of a neutral nation be sacrificed yet had repeatedly succumbed to British demands.”¹⁹ As well, Wilson had campaigned on the slogan of “He kept us out of war”²⁰ which is in part true, but he had suppressed the voice of the enemy

¹⁷ Clifton James Child, *The German-Americans in Politics*, 169.

¹⁸ Gustavus Oblinger, “To Our Citizens of German Descent,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 21, 1917.

¹⁹ Clifford L. Nelson, *German-American Political Behavior*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

to the United States' allies in the conflict over in Europe. The German-American community of Wisconsin looked to oust him as president in the election of 1916 though it led to very little support as Wilson did end up winning reelection in that year. This came to the dismay of the German-American community which did impact the turnout of the election as they fought to try and capture the presidency and with this came the knowledge that war in Europe was imminent. Wilson reclaimed the presidency and less than a year into his second term he asks Congress to declare war for the United States. This declaration was only the fourth time in the short history of the country that it had declared war, and was now involved in the fight in Europe.

United States Reaction to German-Americans

“Those were the sweetless, wheatless, meatless, heatless, and perfectly brainless days when your fathers broke Beethoven’s records, boycotted Wagner’s music, burned German books, painted German Lutheran churches and Goethe’s monument in Chicago the color of Shell filling stations today; strung up a Mennonite preacher in Collingsville, Oklahoma, by his neck until he fainted, repeated the process until he fainted again, and graciously relented; hanged another to a limb of a tree in Collinsville, Illinois, until he was dead.”²¹

A quote from a German-American socialist discussing the hysteria that grew out of the states throughout the war years. As well as the enthusiasm that was had in fighting the war on the home front by American citizens. The effect that the war had on those at home is as important as the men who fought overseas as this first World War had major implications on the rights and liberties of the citizens throughout the country. As mentioned before, out of this conflict came both the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 which played major roles in limiting the first amendment rights of the citizens of the United States. As well, with war comes a sort of disdain for the enemy group. This can be seen throughout all of history as the American

²¹ Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken* (New York: Henry Holt, 1940), 323. Found in Luebke's, *Bonds of Loyalty*, 225.

home front became hostile towards Japanese-Americans during World War II, against Arabs over the last few decades with conflict over in the Middle-East and against communists during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. It is common for those at home to feel a sort of resentment towards the enemy group within the country. That was the case of German immigrants, and German-American citizens during the first World War.

In an effort to gain support for the war in Europe, a series of propaganda campaigns came out. Some of the more famous ones being the well-known Uncle Sam poster saying, “I want You”, as well as those asking for help in raising funds by purchasing liberty bonds throughout the war. However, some of these propaganda pieces were used to try and grow a hatred and fear of German citizens, commonly referring to them as Hun, and making them out to be savages. Using images such as the Germans being apes who are holding and killing women, as well as some saying how they eat babies were spreading throughout the country and offered a fear and hatred towards the enemy of the United States. These posters and comics that were being created for the benefit of growing patriotism throughout the states brought about mixed feelings by the German immigrants and native sons and daughters of the United States as they were slandering the very people who inhabited this country. Though that didn’t matter to the true patriots of the country as the values and traditions being upheld in the United States were above any one group no matter how large an ethnic group was.

With the declaration of war, public opinion opposing it seemed to almost vanish overnight.²² As discussed before, the representatives of Wisconsin did try and keep the United States out of the European conflict but to no avail. The suppression of the first amendment rights

²² Richard L. Pifer, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin*, 116.

of Americans, with the focus being on German-American citizens then began shortly after the United States made their way into conflict.

Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for war to be declared on April 2, 1917 after issues over submarine warfare with the German's started to become a problem for what then was a neutral country.²³ Along with the submarine issues overseas, a controversial telegram sent out by Arthur Zimmerman brought concern to the United States. The telegram was a statement sent to Mexico requesting that they side with the Germans if the United States decided to declare war. In return for siding with them the Germans would give Mexico some of the old territories like Texas and New Mexico, that were taken from them by the United States.²⁴ The combination of these two pressing matters pushed the Presidents hand towards war and eventually resulted in Americas entry into the conflict. Woodrow Wilson addressed the people saying his goals at the time were:

“But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for those things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.”²⁵

With the intentions of protecting the rights of smaller countries as well as keeping the world free, it seems somewhat ironic the control that Wilson was demanding over his own

²³ Richard L. Pifer, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin*, 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ Woodrow Wilson, Address of the President of the United States delivered at a joint session of the two Houses of Congress, April 2, 1917, 7264 S. doc. 5, volume 10. Found in Pifer's, *The Great War Comes to Wisconsin*, 62-63.

country because only two months later congress passed the original legislation of the Espionage Act of 1917 which limited the rights to free speech allowed throughout the US.

The Espionage Act of 1917 passed through congress relatively quickly and was used in order to try and keep enemies of the state from speaking out against the United States government and its actions overseas. The summary of the bill is written as: “To punish acts of interference with the foreign relations, the neutrality, and the foreign commerce of the United States, to punish espionage, and better to enforce the criminal laws of the United States, and for other purposes.”²⁶ This was the first step in trying to rid the United States of Espionage on the home front and avoid conflict at home as well as harboring those who could be helping the enemy abroad. With the enforcement of this bill it became almost impossible to congregate as a group without a government official being present. It got to a point where even just going to church and trying to live day to day life became an issue.²⁷ This bill really shifted the lifestyle of Americans as they started to live under this microscope that the government had created in order to rid itself of subversion and espionage.

Less than a year later the government decided to take it a step further as well, with the inclusion of the Sedition Act of 1918. Further censoring the rights of its citizens, the government decided to amend the Espionage Act which included being disloyal to the country and speaking out against its decisions was now punishable as well. The inclusion of this amendment in loose terms stated that by showing any sort of support for an enemy nation to the US such as Germany was punishable under the law. This meant that flying a German flag at your house or speaking

²⁶ 1. U.S. Congress, House, *Espionage Act of 1917*, HR 215, 65th Cong., 1st sess. Introduced in House May 15, 1917.

²⁷ William H. Thomas Jr., *Unsafe for Democracy*, 3.

the German language instead of English was all illegal at this point in the war. This kind of censorship was unprecedented up until this point in the United States' history as the government had never limited one of the basic rights that the country had been founded on before to this extreme.

These bills brought about an expansion for the United States Department of Justice as now they were told to look into the lives of citizens of German and Austrian descent who were thought to possibly be spies to the United States. If they were to find anything through these investigations, they would find a way to suppress the group involved. In Wisconsin, hundreds of investigations were underway as the state had a target on its back from the start of the war due to their dissatisfaction with fighting the conflict in the first place. The department of Justice had it out for Wisconsin and thus was forced to police the state throughout the war in trying to find citizens who might speak out against the government or might be in contact with their fatherland of Germany.

The Hunt for Spies: The Case of Paul von Szeliski

Paul von Szeliski to anyone of his neighbors might have appeared to be just an everyday man. He was a family man who sold insurance for a company and lived at 143 N. Prospect Ave in Madison, WI with his wife and children.²⁸ However, in 1917 he was put under investigation by the Department of Justice out of fear of being a German spy. This arose from his past experiences as well as from his time spent traveling. As discussed throughout this research this was not uncommon for the Department of Justice as the fear of German-Americans was at an all-time high during World War I. In Thomas Jr.'s text he mentions how "Justice Department

²⁸ Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

detectives were systematically trying to silence critics of the war throughout the state.”²⁹

Wisconsin was really hit hard with these investigations and Paul von Szeliski was not immune even with little known about him. Looking through the documents that are accessible, a history of the investigation of Paul von Szeliski can be made and allows a first-hand story of just your average everyday immigrant who was requested in order to try and find out if he was in fact a German spy.

The story begins May 29th, 1917 as a notice was made to begin looking into the affairs of Paul von Szeliski. He was naturalized in Toronto, Canada but was found to be unfaithful to his oath there as he “left Canada in a hurry last autumn.”³⁰ This anonymous informant also decided to mention that he was charged with “conducting a private wireless station in his own house, and of being an active agent of von Bernstorff.”³¹ This obviously being a big no-no as the war years began to progress, the harboring of an agent seems to be something that a spy might do, and this is not someone who should be living among the enemy of the German army within a largely German state. So, at the request of this writer, they wanted to begin inquiries about von Szeliski and start to really look into this man’s life.

After further investigating into this man who was naturalized in Canada, it was found that he left in such a hurry due to his being unfaithful to the oath he took in Canada. As well they said that he “found it conducive to his health and physical welfare to leave Canada in a hurry last autumn.”³² It is mentioned though that the charges presented against von Szeliski of being an

²⁹ William H. Thomas Jr., *Unsafe for Democracy*, 120.

³⁰ Paul von Szeliski, *Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens*.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

agent for a German politician and ambassador to the United States Johann Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff were true. The government in Canada took a very lax approach to following up on the case however and so he was able to leave the country without any sort of issue.³³ Now the fear becomes that this “Hun” as they call him is still working for this von Bernstorff, and could be running an underground route for him within the United States.³⁴ Now it has become an active part of the Department of Justice to further investigate von Szeliski and try and figure out if he is truly a spy.

June 1, 1917 the District Superintendent in Wisconsin gets involved in the matter, as a letter from one Charles H. Whelan of Illinois quotes how he believes von Szeliski to have left Canada to escape capture and claims him to be an agent of the Imperial German Government all based on the information presented to him.³⁵ He then says how he plans to take it upon himself to look into the matter further and try and learn all he can about the case in order to try and figure out who this man truly is. Something really interesting comes from the response on the same day, as the man writes how he appreciates them bringing the matter to their attention, then saying how “The patriotism which prompted your writing is greatly appreciated.”³⁶ The showing of feeling this to be an act of patriotism stands out, as just presenting this information which is almost purely based on speculation to look into this family man who has immigrated to the US is a true sign of patriotism. A display of the ways that people during wartimes change the ways they

³³ Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

interact as the importance of patriotism within the country becomes a key aspect of life among the citizens.

After that a formal report is delivered to von Szeliski at his home on N. Prospect Ave in Madison, requesting his cooperation with the agents assigned to his case. This agent is based out of a Chicago office and is known as Special Agent Burger who at the time has only received one report.³⁷ The next few documents deal with trying to find out more about von Szeliski. An interesting note is found as the Secretary of the Dane County Council of Defense had found out that both his son and von Szeliski's son attend the same school. Through their children they were informed of the letter that was sent to Paul. This then they learned of von Szeliski's position in Chicago though it could not be found where he was working.³⁸

Reading into the next few documents, the investigation into von Szeliski begins to grow as knowledge of a close friend named John Krause grows to light as they both seem to be constantly visiting one another in private. The Department then requested that Krause's house be put under surveillance by what the author of the report calls "neighbors who are loyal."³⁹ As well, it becomes known that von Szeliski was visited by a Pennsylvania State Insurance Company which Paul had worked for when in Canada.⁴⁰ Though it was reported that he was let go due to the fact they believed him to be "hostile to the United States."⁴¹ Very serious concern is growing as von Szeliski's character starts to become clouded with negative aspects as well as a

³⁷ Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

growing concern over him being a German agent. It has also become known that Paul now makes constant trips back and forth between Madison and Chicago working in a business that no one in his family seems to know about.⁴² From this, von Szeliski is put under close surveillance as it was feared that he was a dangerous alien enemy, though at this point there was not quite enough evidence to determine whether or not to take him in as a spy.

A letter received on January 8th, 1918 finally gives a glimpse into the background of Paul von Szeliski who was “born in Dansig, Germany, on December 17, 1859 and left Germany in August 1883, and went to England where he remained for 6 weeks and proceeded to Canada. There he remained until September 1916 and came to the United States by the way of Detroit... he is now in the insurance business.”⁴³ From this it was reported that he was an illegal alien enemy in the US at the time and therefore was required to report to the US Marshal’s office in order to apply for a permit.⁴⁴ It is interesting how long it took to get full details on von Szeliski as one would think his background would be pretty simple to find. Though at this time what was most important seemed to be figuring out his intentions within the states.

In the following documents it is made apparent that the fear surrounding Paul von Szeliski is not without some warrant. A letter was received written by a co-worker of von Szeliski who described him as a man who should not be working for the firm as he was “so very openly pro-German that his firm lost business and public opinion forced him out”.⁴⁵ This obviously does not sit well in the American governments eyes as this is the exact reason they put

⁴² Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

in place the espionage and sedition acts during the war years which led investigators to further surveil von Szeliski. The ways they were able to trace him was having him report to the Marshall's office whenever he was traveling between Madison and Chicago for work. However, they ran into further complications as von Szeliski was not always compliant with these rules put before him as he was in the US on an alien enemy permit which brought about restrictions to what he could and could not do within the US borders. These restrictions started to get von Szeliski into further trouble as he was not making it apparent to the Marshal's office when he was and was not traveling between the states which is "plainly in violation of the law applicable to alien enemies."⁴⁶

Contact was finally made between the agency investigating von Szeliski and the man himself as they had called him and told him to report to the Marshal's office which he did that same day.⁴⁷ It was at this time that he was interrogated and forced to register as an alien enemy which he had not done due to the fact he thought it was not necessary due to him being a British subject.⁴⁸ This however, was countered with the fact that he was born in Germany and naturalized in Canada so therefore he was required to register. It is from this first personal interaction that the Agent determined von Szeliski to have "all the looks and appearance of a dangerous Pro-German character."⁴⁹ It is at this time as well that they requested further surveillance of von Szeliski and also had tried to plan out a potential warrant for search of his

⁴⁶ Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

premises.⁵⁰ None of this came to be however, as shortly after this meeting a request to visit Battle Creek, MI was made by von Szeliski and was granted though he was under heavy surveillance.⁵¹

The last document present is one from Battle Creek, MI which state how Paul was interested in obtaining a passport to leave and go back to Toronto. The agents at the office stated that they “talked some time with Mr. Szeliski and discovered nothing about him which suggested the spy. I endorsed on his passport to go to Toronto...”⁵² The story of Paul von Szeliski ends here as he was not found to be a spy for the German military and eventually resided in Madison with his family. What can be found on him after this is just related to the personals sections of the Wisconsin State Journal which talks all about his daughter’s engagement as well as her wedding plans. It is safe to say that all this investigating into the life of a man who was believed to be a dangerous threat to the US during the war was completely unnecessary as he was simply a man working in insurance who might have had some pro-German beliefs in a state where it was not uncommon to believe in loyalty to Germany.

Conclusion

Throughout the short US intervention into World War I, thousands of investigations were made into the lives of German-American citizens. Families similar to Paul von Szeliski’s were constantly being harassed by investigators and surveilled by both the offices involved as well as neighbors who were considered loyal to the US. Paul’s story really stood out to me personally as

⁵⁰ Paul von Szeliski, Investigating Records Relating to German Aliens.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

the case goes to all these extremes as fear over what he might be capable of or doing were very concerning throughout the whole investigation. But it turned out he really was just an average family man working in insurance back and forth between Madison and Chicago. Though the story does not have a very exciting ending, it is the case for thousands of others who went through similar investigations just to be talked to by one person or agency and found to be non-threatening whatsoever.

These investigations and the look into these thousands of cases throughout the first World War became prevalent due to the restrictions put on these ethnic groups because of the Espionage and Sedition acts put into place by President Wilson. The state of Wisconsin was hit the hardest by these acts as over a quarter of the population of the state was put under a lens. The Department of Justice to look into and try and figure out who wasn't a loyal patriot to the United States. The acts of conformity that were required of the citizens of Wisconsin in order to pass the test of appearing loyal is something that is not uncommon in times of war which is truly saddening and unacceptable. The US ended up on the winning side of the conflict in Europe, as well as their allies who helped in the battle throughout the course of the four-year war. However, the framework of American censorship, and the lives of millions of individuals on the home front were drastically impacted due to the acts imposed and since then have only limited the rights and freedoms further through times of trial and fear within the US.

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