Life at Four Corners
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Don't worry about me. I'm proud to fight for my country. But, when you write, don't put a single word in German for it will hurt me and you too. Our letters are read by our officers. English is the best language anyway.¹

When Will Schroeder wrote this letter from France in 1918, he identified the most difficult adjustment that his community at Block faced during World War I and in the following decades. German culture, especially the German language, was under attack at a national as well as at a local level in the United States. The war with Germany in 1917 and its aftermath profoundly affected the Block community's institutions of church and school. Families and individuals in Block found themselves in an ambivalent struggle to maintain the old and to institute the new. No longer could the community limit its interactions with the outside world; that world had come to Block and would not be deterred. The advent of World War I and its ramifications opened a twenty-year struggle over the use of the German language and its eventual demise in the church and school at Block.

At the national level, it was the Missouri Synod's "Germanness" and its religious exclusivity that threatened American superpatriots and fueled anti-German rhetoric and behavior. The synod's exclusive use of the German language, its pro-German stance before 1917, its rigid definition of the separation of church and state, and its aversion to ecumenical fellowship with other Protestant groups made it an obvious target for charges of un-Americanism.² Missouri Synod congregations and pastors received a large share of the abuse from the anti-German behavior precipitated by World War I.³ Fortunately, in the Block community violence played a minimal role during this controversial time, but other effects on the community and its people were significant and permanent.
Events during World War I and the following two decades clearly demonstrate the ongoing struggle of the Block community as it confronted its religious and ethnic distinctiveness. Responding to external pressure, the church and school in Block, like most Missouri Synod institutions, began a series of transitions designed to avoid potential conflict. The threat of violence from the outside, however, did little to lessen the internal struggles of each local congregation as painful changes became necessary when national and local pressures intensified.

Although nationally the Missouri Synod defended itself against a number of charges of un-Americanism, Block, along with many local synod churches, suffered most from the issue of language. After the United States entered the war in 1917, continued use of the German language was a visible sign of behavior that many Americans perceived as suspiciously unpatriotic. The telephone switchboard in Block resounded with German, all church services were still in German, and the parochial school taught much of its curriculum in German.

As the Allied war effort deteriorated in summer and fall 1917, the church and school in Block made no formal changes to accommodate the mounting pressures. Local county papers that had printed some pro-German essays and articles before April 1917 escalated their anti-German editorials and essays. Certainly some residents of Block found themselves in a quandary and had to censor their comments while in town. Elsie Prothe Dageforde remembered that some residents “kinda upheld Germany in a way, since they originated from there. But I don’t think they really said too much because they were afraid to.”

In winter 1917–1918, the anti-German rhetoric peaked locally and nationally, and the Missouri Synod could no longer ignore a serious crisis. The Lutheran Witness discussed the “turn of affairs” and the pending “disaster” that awaited the synod’s institutions if the membership failed to show “outward evidence of goodwill and American spirit.” Regionally, midwesterners experienced harassment and violent acts against German Americans. Missouri Synod churches and schools throughout the Midwest were vandalized, burned, and forced to close. German-Lutheran churches came under heated attack, particularly in Nebraska. In describing the problems throughout the Midwest, Frederick Luebke postulates that Kansas had fewer violent incidents because the State Council for Defense was coordinated by Missouri Synod Lutheran Martin Graebner, a professor and clergyman.
at St. John’s College. The Nebraska Council as well as other state councils included “superpatriots” and newspaper publishers who continued to bombard the public with anti-German and inflammatory rhetoric.  

Although the church in Block was not vandalized, the community took these threats and the regional vandalism seriously. New Lancaster, located seven miles from Block, seemed to pose a particular threat, and some men from Block spent evening hours guarding the church grounds from vandals. Marie Peckman Wendte recalled,

> We had to be careful [in Block]. New Lancaster people were against us because we still had German in church and school. [We] had people stay up all night to watch the church so they wouldn’t burn it down. [Men] kept an eye on it. We had to quit teaching in school for a while. The teacher had to use the American language to make peace.  

These external pressures and an important series of events in 1918 convinced the Block community to act. In February and May 1918 the local county papers printed front-page articles on the required registration of “Alien Enemies,” and many men and women in Block were forced to register and to be photographed and fingerprinted as potential
enemies of the government. In response to local pressure and to pressures from the district synod offices, Block’s formal church and school organizations acknowledged and began visibly to support the American war effort. In March 1918 the Ladies Aid openly assisted the war effort by donating ten dollars to the Red Cross. In April the male voters’ assembly took its first decisive action in recognition of the war when it voted to accommodate to “war time” by changing the scheduled meeting time of its church and school. In this same voters’ meeting, a proclamation read from the national synod gave permission for the men in Block to join the Farmer’s Union and encouraged them to do so as a sign of patriotism. The pastor also read a letter from the United States government asking for voluntary troops.

Not until a special meeting in May 1918 did the voters’ assembly openly discuss the crucial issue of language. Although the men refused to relinquish the German language, they encouraged the teacher to use more English in the school. The group also ordered five hundred copies of Theodore Graebner’s *Testimony and Proof Bearing on the Relation of the American Lutheran Church to the German Emperor*, a thirty-two-page tract commissioned by the national synod’s president to alleviate fears about the Missouri Synod’s loyalty to Germany. The assembly then decided to buy a “service flag” and to put “Trinity Lutheran” in English on the front of the church building.

The July assembly voted to have the pastor read a letter from the “patriotic committee” after the church service on Sunday and agreed that the annual school picnic was to be a totally patriotic picnic, with the proceeds going to the Red Cross. The schoolteacher, H. F. Klinkermann, played a key role by coordinating the school picnic and the children’s activities to create the patriotic theme. He personally led the campaign for Red Cross donations, and even more important, he took a public stance on the necessity of providing signs of American patriotism in the school and community.

The local paper covered the picnic in detail, making much of its patriotic nature. A non-Lutheran and an army chaplain were invited to speak; County Judge C. F. Hensen spoke on “Patriotism as Taught in the Lutheran Schools,” and the Lutheran chaplain from Camp Funston was particularly praised: “[The chaplain] made a fine address along patriotic lines. . . . He advised all his hearers to generously support the war savings stamp campaign, liberty bond campaigns, the Y.M.C.A., the Red Cross and all beneficial war work.”
With the war continuing, in October 1918 the voters' assembly postponed the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Trinity Lutheran Church in Block. Another letter from the "patriotic committee" was read, which advised congregations to discontinue the German language in the school and to begin the use of public schoolbooks except for religion. Additionally, the voters approved a donation for the Army/Navy Board sponsored by the Missouri Synod. Although the war ended a month later, the changes in language policy would continue to dominate voters' meetings for two more decades.

Given the difficult circumstances, why was the Block community so reluctant to make changes in its formal institutions of church and school? Although the reasons are complex and varied, some hypotheses can be examined. Nationally, the Missouri Synod defended itself by reciting the importance of the separation of church and state, but the Block community probably resisted less for political than for personal reasons. First and foremost, the Block community was composed of immigrants whose religious and ethnic traits never allowed them complete access to the American mainstream. They were accustomed to being different from their American and non-Lutheran neighbors and took a certain pride in their separateness. Their religion stressed and encouraged this distinctiveness to ensure reine Lehre. Alan Graebner describes this attitude of resistance as a "siege mentality" that affords the Missouri Synod Lutheran the will to resist even in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Outsiders both as immigrants and as religious separatists, the residents of Block, much like the synod itself, observed an "official silence" as long as possible while attempting to insulate themselves from outside intervention. Religiously and ethnically, the stakes were high; a defensive posture was not unusual for the Block community if it felt threatened. The German language was so bound to German culture and religion that to sever language ties was to sever values and beliefs as well. For some individuals, Americanizing was not particularly threatening or unwanted, but many residents strongly resented being dictated to or forced to institute change because of pressure from secular groups or even from the national synod.

Although there were religious implications that justified Block's resistance to change, people may have opposed it for several other reasons. For many residents, the war was completely unrelated to their ethnic, religious, and cultural life; families had personal ties to Ger-
many, not political ones. Residents defended their language and culture because they saw them as ultimately unconnected to the war; the community viewed their church as devoid of political connections. Clergy rarely if ever used the pulpit for overtly political reasons. Many individuals in Block viewed the attack on their church, school, and language as a personal affront unrelated to their American patriotism, which, they assumed, they should not have to demonstrate.\(^{20}\)

Block’s institutions and formal organizations eventually responded to external pressures to change, and another important factor facilitated these transitions. The war had a direct impact on families and individuals in the community, forcing some residents to confront their “Germanness” and religious exclusivity in personal ways. Gertrude Krause was a hired girl working in Winfield, Kansas, and attending classes at St. Johns College; she expressed her personal and spiritual anxieties in a letter to Lydia Prothe Schultz in 1917.

> That we are now in war you know without doubt already. Will Martin and Ernest go also? From here over hundreds go into the war, also some of students go into the war. The whole city is crowded with soldiers. Oh, this horrible war! Now nearly all the world is in war. Then maybe the [last day] will come. Don’t you think so too? I just feel like that.\(^{21}\)

Gertrude’s letter portrays the ambivalence, frustration, and anxiety felt by many German Lutherans in the Block community. Even as she realized and understood the personal cost of American intervention, she felt frightened and totally overwhelmed by the future such a war might bring.

When the war began in Europe, many families still corresponded with their German relatives and subscribed to German-American newspapers. These two activities connecting Germans in Block to the old country were effectively decreased if not eliminated entirely by 1917 when the United States became involved in the war. Families who had maintained connections for decades suddenly stopped communicating, never to correspond again. The German-American newspapers that carried many national events about Germany and German culture were typically no longer obtained and read in Block’s homes.\(^{22}\)

Besides this severing of European and personal and cultural ties, families experienced the double bind of watching their sons leave for mil-
Camp Funston, near Ft. Riley, Kansas, existed as a boot camp for new recruits during World War I.

Military service, possibly to fight against relatives and friends still living in Germany. Will Schroeder's letter (p. 136) provides insight into the type of indoctrination many third-generation men from Block experienced in the military. German-American men confronted direct and indirect hostility and suspicion in the army; their very names encouraged the special scrutiny of officers or peers. By summer 1918 seventeen men from Block had been drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to Camp Funston, Kansas, for training. The young men, who had rarely if ever been outside Miami County, found themselves thrown into the army's melting pot where their German accents and names often caused them embarrassment or forced them to demonstrate their patriotism. While in camp some men from Block probably observed firsthand the treatment of those men who failed to perform their patriotic duties. Kansas had a large contingency of German Mennonites who were ultimately drafted and sent to Camp Funston. Being German American and conscientious objectors placed a particular burden on Kansas Mennonites, who considered any type of military work as un-Christian. The men from Block witnessed the repercussions when twelve German-American Mennonites refused an order to cut down a sunflower; the
twelve were placed in confinement, court-martialed, and sentenced to twenty-five years imprisonment for refusing to work.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1918 the outside world came to Block in the form of an executive order from President Wilson, and some women and men experienced a marginal status based on both gender and ethnicity. In February the local newspapers announced Wilson’s order requiring the registration of “alien enemies,” or all German-born men who did not have citizenship.\textsuperscript{25} In June the newspaper announced registration for “alien females”—German-born women without American citizenship or any woman married to a German-born male without citizenship.\textsuperscript{26}

This presidential act caused renewed suspicion to be cast on the Block community, as twenty men and eighteen women were required to be photographed, questioned, and fingerprinted at the Paola post office. Stunned and confused, the Block community was appalled that some of its members were subjected to such treatment. Some of the women were particularly indignant since one-third of those required to register were second-generation, American-born and had received full citizenship at birth; their crime was to be married to German-born, first- or second-generation men who had no citizenship. The women, like their male peers, were threatened with immediate deportation if they did not comply with this registration. Esther Prothe Maisch reported that her American-born mother was so angry about the registration that she refused to give the family extra copies of the required photo even though they pleaded for one as a keepsake.\textsuperscript{27} Even an eighty-four-year-old grandmother, Rosena Debrick Schultz, was required to be interrogated, photographed, and fingerprinted.\textsuperscript{28}

Although the men complied with the required registration, confusion and resentment abounded. Dick Ohlmeier had applied for citizenship papers soon after coming to Miami County, voted in all elections, and assumed he was a citizen; he was startled to discover he was not an American citizen because he had not completed all the required papers.\textsuperscript{29} Martin Gerken had farmed in Block for over fifty years after coming to the United States in 1859; when questioned by authorities about his citizenship papers, he replied, “I served three years and three months in the Union army during the rebellion, and till the close of the war . . . I always understood that made me a citizen.”\textsuperscript{30}

With sons being sent to war and with trusted and important members of the community being labeled “alien enemies” by the government, the Block community received a boost in morale from a young woman raised
in the community. Elizabeth Block, granddaughter of midwife Gesche Block, provided a much-needed example of American patriotism, honoring the community in an unusual and a dramatic way. Independent and unmarried, Elizabeth had left the community to attend nursing school in Denver, Colorado, graduating in 1911 and then working for five years as "chief nurse" in Santa Rita, New Mexico. When the United States entered the war, she immediately volunteered to go to France to serve in a Red Cross hospital. For months her request was rejected by the government because her parents were German-born. Her loyalties were scrutinized at length, but local county officials, including Western Spirit editor Barney Sheridan, lobbied on her behalf. The schoolteacher, H. F. Klinkermann, and others in the Block community wrote letters attesting to her good character and loyalty. Sheridan and Klinkermann had been important promoters of Block's patriotism and realized the symbolic value of Elizabeth Block's service to the war effort. Finally, after months of delays and government investigation, she sailed to France in summer 1918, serving there for one year. The only Miami County woman to serve in France, she was steadfastly honored by county officials and became a symbol of Block's loyalty during the anti-German crises of 1918.31

Even as the draft and alien registration noticeably singled out citi-
zens of Block, a more subtle pressure was exerted during spring 1918. In late 1917 and early 1918, county officials began encouraging all citizens to buy liberty bonds and to support the Red Cross. In the eyes of many county leaders, support of the Red Cross and bond drives symbolized patriotic fervor and pride; in fact, donations to either effort usually meant an individual’s name and monetary gift would be published in the county papers.

With few exceptions, members of the Block community had not participated in either of these activities throughout 1917. As pressures mounted over the language of the church and school, individuals in Block were growing anxious about their personal safety and thus more cautious about their behavior. Anti-German rhetoric was escalating nationally and locally, so citizens in Block typically kept a low profile, particularly while in town. Elsie Prothe Dageforde explained that “a lot of the people in town were against the German people, so we had to be very careful what we said, particularly if you were in town.”

In fall 1917 the Miami County Republican reprinted a scathing anti-German article: “The only difference between German Germans and American Germans is that they are 3000 miles apart ... it would be better if all Germans lived in Germany.” The following spring even the Western Spirit, whose rhetoric typically had been less inflammatory, reprinted an article written by an “American author of high character and world wide renown,” who encouraged his readers to “wipe out the last vestige of sentiment in favor of anything that is German. ... The German language shall neither be taught nor spoken in America, and every German book must be destroyed. German songs must be cast aside and forbidden and the very name of Germany must be condemned. ... The word German must be eliminated and the government of Germany destroyed.”

It is probably no coincidence that alien registrations in February coincided with the largest bond drive ever in East Valley Township. B. J. Sheridan published a special article complimenting Block’s war efforts and praising the residents’ patriotism.

There are no more loyal citizens in Miami County to-day than those living in the German settlement of Block, southeast of Paola. ... The [liberty bond] response was immediate, almost two thousand dollars being raised in one month and still the good
work goes on. Word from there now is that many are already figuring on investing in the third liberty bonds.\(^{35}\)

In April almost all names listed as new donors to the Red Cross were from the Block community, and the May and June donation lists from East Valley Township were replete with German names.\(^{36}\) Editor Sheridan listed every activity in support of the war that occurred in Block throughout 1918, usually giving it front-page status. His willingness to publish and praise Block’s war efforts in 1918 probably played a significant role in preventing violence and vandalism against the German-Lutheran community and its people. Had Sheridan inflamed his readers, as many Kansas editors did, with anti-German or anti-Block sentiment the consequences could have been devastating for the community.\(^{37}\)

Many historians labeled the war as the most important single event in promoting the assimilation of Germans into American culture, but the Block community continued to spend the next two decades struggling with the language issue.\(^{38}\) Nationally, the language used in parochial schools had long been a source of turmoil for German-Lutheran communities and for other religious groups; the Edwards Law (1889) in Illinois and the Bennett Law (1890) in Wisconsin had attempted to eliminate foreign languages in all public and private schools.\(^{39}\) Although these two laws were eventually repealed, World War I brought a renewed effort to force all private schools to use English exclusively. In 1919 twenty-one states, including Kansas, had laws requiring English only in public and private schools.\(^{40}\) States continued to pass school-language restrictions until two important Supreme Court rulings resolved the issue in the mid-1920s in favor of the parochial and private schools.\(^{41}\)

Despite the national and state turmoil, the Missouri Synod continued to uphold the importance of the German language in its schools and churches. Yet some pastors and laity avidly pushed use of the English language and remained committed to change although conservative powers in the synod refused to budge on the language issue. Even after the war crises, the Missouri Synod’s president “felt the loss of German language would ruin the school system” and expose the people “to all manner of American heterodoxy.”\(^{42}\)

The Block community mirrored the national synod’s ambiguity on
the language issue, and the voters' assembly minutes of the 1920s and 1930s reflect this struggle. In January 1923 the assembly voted for one English service a month to be taught by the "student" who also served as the assistant teacher. The language question was discussed throughout the next two years, but not until January 1925 was another change accepted; the "student" was assigned to teach *Christenlehre* once a month in English.

In January 1929 the voters' assembly initiated a long and controversial process: the translation of the church's constitution into English. For six months, the constitution committee worked to complete the task, only to have it voted down in the next assembly meeting. A special meeting was called for May, but no quorum was present. Finally, in the July voters' meeting, the new English constitution was accepted and read to the entire congregation.

The school received attention in the January 1931 voters' meeting when religious instruction for the three lower grades was discussed to determine whether German or English was to be used. Three changes, all attempting to increase the use of English, were proposed, and all three were voted down. The group agreed, however, that report cards would be used in the parochial school. The April and July meetings that year played a pivotal role in slowing the transition to English. Although the assembly voted for two English services a month, the conservatives won a crucial victory in the July meeting when the proposal was made and accepted that all decisions made by the assembly would require a two-thirds vote instead of a simple majority. Bolstered by the constitutional change, the conservatives attempted to rescind the April decision to have two English services a month. After verbal battling and three different votes, the two English services remained but monthly communion was to be in German in two of every three months.

Each individual change from German to English, whether in church or school, created controversy and compromise, but slowly the pro-English faction found a two-thirds majority to make the changes. In 1932 practicality pushed the voters into changing the Christmas service to English since "there are children who do not know German." Afternoon Lenten services remained in German, however. By 1936 the voters agreed to record their minutes in English but to alternate German and English in the opening Scripture and prayer. Finally,
in 1937, after “lengthy discussion and a short recess,” the voters agreed that the German language would no longer be used in religious classes, confirmation class, and Christenlehre. 49

Although the institutions of church and school changed slowly, many postwar families and individuals at Block embraced Americanization and made a concerted effort to enter more fully into the outside world. People from Block accomplished the move through wider job opportunities, non-German marriages, secular activities and organizations, and expanded travel opportunities. Young men's military experiences changed perspectives and attitudes, facilitating Americanization. Newborns were rarely given all German names, and radio, print media, and advertising influenced farm and home.

Baptisms and weddings looked less German, and non-German-speaking spouses helped to bring about the necessary increases in English church services. In the 1920s it was not unusual for a new bride to come to church in Block with her husband, take her place across the aisle from him with the other women, and sit through the entire German service not understanding one word of it. 50 Cemetery markers also indicate that the transition from German to English proceeded more quickly among the people themselves than it did in the institutions in the community. Between 1909 and 1919, 48 percent of all grave markers were still inscribed in German; by the end of the next decade, the number of German inscriptions had dropped to 10 percent. 51

With the creation of a Lutheran church in Paola, town dwellers returned home less and began attending their own institutions of church and school. Young people of the third and fourth generations identified less with the Block community, and some began attending public high school. World War I anti-German sentiments caused embarrassment for community members who wished to embrace American ways; they wanted to prove it was possible to be good Lutherans and still speak and “act” like Americans. Block clearly lost most of its “liberalizing force” to the town church, where the language and cultural changes were rarely controversial. Dissenters from Block simply drove to town for church.

As families and individuals made the necessary transitions and as the church and school slowly Americanized, Germany's war activities in the late 1930s once again forced the Block community to examine its ways. In 1935 the community had the opportunity to hear a Missouri Synod pastor speak on his recent trip to Hitler's Germany; five
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Block soldier serving in New Guinea during World War II.

hundred people attended, and the event was covered by the Western Spirit. This speech was probably the community’s last direct link with prewar Germany.

When World War II began in Europe, the Block community had much less to fear from outsiders and was more unified in its response. Before the United States entered the war, the voters’ assembly had approved two “collections” for relief aid and for the Army/Navy chaplains. When young men from Block began to enter the military in 1942, the assembly quickly sent money for the synod’s Army/Navy chaplains and voted to purchase a service flag and an honor roll; the Ladies Aid purchased a one-hundred-dollar war bond. However willing the church was to promote public displays of loyalty, the voters of Block still struggled with the language issue within the church. In October 1942 the assembly voted down an attempt to reduce the number of German services to one a month. Although a strong majority (60 percent) voted for the change, once again the requirement
Another World War II soldier from Block, Elmer Maisch, who worked in the army motor pool and drove an ambulance in England.

for a two-thirds majority saved the German language and postponed the transition to English.\textsuperscript{56}

By the war's end in 1945, the voters' assembly had taken two more special collections and had resolved to have a special "Thanks Service" in celebration of armistice in Europe;\textsuperscript{57} the Ladies Aid bought another one-hundred-dollar war bond in 1944.\textsuperscript{58} The effects of World War II on the community were far more subtle than those of World War I; the open hostility and threats of 1918 were gone. The local newspaper in 1942 reported that resident Henry Pagels had received a twenty-five-word message in German through the international Red Cross from his brother in Doverden, announcing the birth of a son, Frederick: "Goes well with all of us."\textsuperscript{59} Pagels had immigrated to Block in the early 1920s; his aunt, Dorothea Pagels Rodewald, had paid his way to the United States when she could no longer run the family farm after the death of her husband. Because he had lived in Germany fairly recently, Pagels became an important linguistic force in the community and helped conservatives retain the German language for a longer period of time.\textsuperscript{60}
World War II provided the final assault on the old ways, linguistically and culturally, particularly for the elderly in the Block community. Having lived through the early difficulties of World War I, they suffered another loss as German discourse on telephones was discouraged and grandsons and granddaughters returned from the war and war-related jobs far more Americanized than when they had left. As jobs opened for women, young girls from Block no longer felt the need to work as hired girls. Most war veterans returned to Block, never to speak German again. Young Fritz Prothe bridged the cultural gap with honor, having served as tank commander and official translator for his platoon.

Although Block's homogeneity was already weakened and change was inevitable, the United States' entry into World War II struck a final blow to the isolation and insulation the Block community had enjoyed for over seven decades. The slow, painful changes toward Americanization dramatized the depth of ethnic and religious conservatism bred into the community for four generations. Ethnic and religious identity, fostered by years of cultural pride and homogeneity, faded into the past. By 1945 only Block's church and school remained, but the community's people continued to symbolize a strong ethnic past for generations to come.