

Introduction

Getting a Perspective on “New Immigrant” America

THIS WORK OPENS with World War I and closes with World War II. A major part of the discussion, though, is devoted to the interlude between these two dramatic events. The purpose is to examine a period when, because immigration faded from the national agenda and the Great Depression dominated American life, it has been assumed that immigrants and their children gave little thought to ethnicity. By focusing on Slovaks, this book attempts to view the era from the standpoint of the “new immigrants” and give them a chance to tell the story from their perspective. Since the United States used restrictive laws to curtail the addition of more foreign-born inhabitants, the demographic characteristics of the new immigrant population in 1920 furnish an essential profile of the first- and second-generation people who would live through the interwar era. To explore the interim from their perspective, it is necessary to keep in mind some distinguishing features about America’s new immigrants from Europe.

By the early twentieth century, conducting America’s decennial censuses involved more than merely counting the number of inhabitants; it entailed scrutinizing the results and their implications for American society. The 1920 census sustained that tradition. It confirmed what some Americans had been dreading since the turn of the century. With slightly more than half (51.4%) of its 105,710,620 inhabitants residing in incorporated places exceeding 2,500 persons, the United States had become an urban country.¹ The 1920 enumeration reinforced a reality already evident in the census ten years earlier: since the turn of the century, America’s population had grown increasingly ethnically diverse. The tabulations listed forty specific “countries of origin” and thirty-one different mother tongues.² The fourteenth census showed that more than one-half of America’s 13,920,692 foreign-born persons had emigrated from new immigrant homelands. Eastern and southern Europeans

represented nearly two-thirds (65.3%) of the contingent that had originated from non-English-speaking countries.³

While new immigrants were dispersed throughout the country, the preponderance of them and their children lived in urban areas located in what the census designated the Middle Atlantic and East North Central states. The presence of diverse ethnic groups made Americans associate “cities” with the “foreign born.” But, while calculations based on the census showed that at least 85 percent of the individual groups from eastern and southern Europe were residing in officially designated urban areas, a significant number actually lived in medium-sized towns.⁴ When these immigrants looked out their windows, they saw smokestacks or coal cars, not bustling city streets. Moreover, in industrial and mining towns, new immigrants could make up a larger percentage of the population than in some of America’s cities. Hence, the inhabitants of some small towns felt the presence of the foreign born and could be more acutely aware of ethnic diversity than big-city residents.

In 1920, immigrants were much older than the general population. The median age for Americans identified as “native white of native parentage” was 22.7 years; it was 40 for foreign-born whites. Immigrants accounted for less than 2 percent of white children under fifteen years old but represented nearly 28 percent of America’s elderly white population over fifty-nine.⁵ Migration patterns, however, had skewed this demographic profile. The foreign-born population from northern and western European countries claimed far more elderly than did the new immigrants. Not only had northern Europeans arrived earlier; the economic motivations that had nurtured the more recent migration from eastern and southern Europe meant that working-age people, normally fifteen years and older, had emigrated. As a result, in 1920 new immigrants were usually younger middle-aged people. Children typically made up less than 5 percent and the elderly less than 7 percent of an individual new immigrant group.⁶

New immigrant America was also decidedly more male than the general population. Although the proportion varied among the nationality groups, the average sex ratio was 118.4 males to 100 females. The excess of younger foreign-born males would have a long-term impact on new immigrant America. Although some single men still intended to send to their homelands for brides, in all likelihood in the 1920s immigrants who wanted to marry would have to find a spouse in the United States. The census provided little data for determining whether “mixed marriages”—the unions between foreign-born immigrants and

native-born individuals—were ethnically endogamous. Statistics identified the immigrants' nationalities but listed their partners simply as "native born." However, even investigators who adopted the philosophy that marriages between immigrants and native-born Americans were indices of assimilation noted that the data, albeit sparse, suggested that immigrants were marrying second-generation persons of their own nationality. In essence, these marriages were likely intergenerational, intraethnic unions.⁷

The demographic characteristics that overarched new immigrant America in 1920 mirrored the complex differences that prevailed *within* each individual group. For despite their shared "immigrant" classification, significant distinctions existed among newcomers of the same nationality. Varying arrival times and ages represented two of these meaningful differences. Some foreign-born persons had been in the United States for three decades or more; others had lived in the country for less than a decade; another small contingent had come after the war. The immigrant generation, therefore, was made up of people who had achieved different levels of acculturation. The foreign-born population also included the generation and a half, meaning individuals who had been brought to the United States as infants or young children and had thus spent their formative years in the New World. Although they were technically immigrants, their experience more closely resembled that of native-born people.⁸ In addition, despite its large middle-aged composition, the first generation contained a broad range of ages and included people at different stages in their family cycle. By 1920, some newcomers had completed their families and had young, adolescent, and even adult offspring; at the same time, a large segment of married couples were just starting their families. Age differences and varying degrees of acculturation among immigrants could be as pronounced as the significant distinctions between them and the native born.

Within the second generation, there were even more subtle diversities. It, too, encompassed a wide age range. In reality, the "second generation" comprised infants in their cradles and children in elementary school as well as young and older adults laboring in mills, factories, and coal mines. Depending on time between births, siblings could experience significantly dissimilar childhoods. The offspring of mixed-marriage couples would grow up in a different family environment from that of youths with two foreign-born parents. Intergenerational unions created familial situations in which one parent was fluent in English and one probably was not. Thus, their children were more likely to speak English

from early childhood than those whose parents were immigrants. Whether children of mixed or foreign-born parentage, the more than 6.3 million children of new immigrants could typically expect to be part of a large household. With an average of four or more children, new immigrant families had slightly higher birthrates than the rest of America's population.⁹

Second-generation children of the 1920s could anticipate a different childhood from that of those who had matured before World War I. In postwar America, youths could expect to attend school through the primary grades, and only a few would be gainfully employed before they attained at least fifteen years of age. Child-labor and school-attendance legislation, primarily in northern states, meant that by 1920 more children spent their early ages studying in school instead of drudging at menial jobs. In 1920, parents of 94.1 percent of all the country's second-generation youths told census takers that their children, ages seven to thirteen years, went to school. The figures, of course, belie a reality of new immigrant America: some parents provided false information concerning their children. In addition, part-time or seasonal employment might have been excluded. Still, for the second generation, by 1920 the trend was toward more elementary education and less gainful employment at early ages.¹⁰

The nearly 7 million eastern and southern Europeans living in the United States at the time of the 1920 census became the mainstay of America's new immigrant population for the next two decades. As a result of restrictive laws, the number of newly arrived immigrants from eastern and southern Europe fell to fewer than 1.2 million persons for the entire decade of the 1920s. With deaths, the obvious net effect was to reduce the foreign-born portion of that population. The increase of native-born children meant that the second generation would ultimately become the major component of what the census termed "foreign white stock." Like other children of the day, second-generation new immigrants would force their parents to endure the rebellions historically associated with the maturation process from adolescence to adulthood. For them, though, challenges to conventional norms included defying parental traditions grounded in foreign cultures. Equally important, both aging immigrants and second-generation people of all ages had been stigmatized by the Immigration Act of 1924 as "undesirables" or "inferior" peoples. During the interwar era, they would have to cope with this reality as well as with the catastrophes and turmoil that characterized the period.

While no single nationality embodied the "new immigration," Slovaks, the second-largest Slavic group to emigrate to the United States, were representative of Americans whose native or ancestral roots were in eastern Europe. Data gleaned from census tables show that, in terms of demographic makeup, Slovaks typified the new immigrant pattern. The foreign-born population, which was recorded as 274,948 persons in 1920, represented 44.3 percent of the Slovak "stock"; the American-born contingent totaled 344,918 (55.6%). Children of mixed native and foreign parentage made up about 7.5 percent of the native-born total. The ratio of men to women, which characterized America's Slavic populations in general, suggested that the number of Slovak children of mixed parentage would increase over the next two decades. Their migration and settlement patterns had taken most Slovaks to the country's industrial north. The socioeconomic makeup of the Slovak populace also resembled that of other new immigrants. Each nationality group did boast a contingent of self-employed people, professionals, and small shopkeepers, but the majority of eastern Europeans toiled in America's mines, manufacturing plants, and mills. Women were engaged in domestic service or held unskilled jobs in factories.¹¹ Despite social stratification within ethnic communities, most Slovak immigrants remained industrial workers throughout their lifetimes.

Of course, shared demographic characteristics and socioeconomic patterns, which highlight similarities, cannot erase differences that distinguished the various nationalities. Each ethnic group was unique; it would be a distortion to claim otherwise. At the same time, in the early decades of the twentieth century, America's new immigrants from Europe faced similar circumstances. Thus, while groups were distinct, there is a common story to be told. For this reason, I determined that my investigation could be anchored to one immigrant group, the Slovaks who emigrated from northern Hungary. The work, however, is not tethered to that group. This book is about "new immigrants" and their children, not just Slovaks.

As a research strategy, focusing on a single group had decided advantages. Instead of being constrictive, this approach allowed me to broaden my investigation to explore diverse aspects of the first- and second-generation experience over a significant time period. It let me probe deeply into the nettlesome issues of cultural maintenance and intergenerational relations. I was able to examine an array of ethnic activities carried out in local communities nationwide and also to scrutinize the extensive discourse about a range of issues that captured the attention

of new immigrant Americans. Moreover, Slovaks of the era themselves would not let the story be narrowly cast. They forced me—and, I hope, my readers in turn—to listen to the more inclusive story they were telling and to consider the wider context of their experience. While it is no surprise that ethnically oriented activities could be shaped by the world around them, this focus on Slovaks uncovered a more complex picture. In addition to anti-foreign sentiments, new immigrants were acutely aware of what they commonly referred to as “other nationalities,” a collective term for non-Slovak ethnic groups. Slovak activities were, in part, molded by an awareness of “other nationalities” and what they were doing. Thus, Slovaks function as a lens through which we can not only view America’s new immigrant communities but also get their perspective on the crucial decades spanning the twentieth century’s two world wars. This study of the Slovak experience, together with its underlying emphasis on “other nationalities,” will, I hope, serve as a challenge for future investigations to discern both similarities and differences among the various ethnic groups.

Perhaps most important, this approach permitted in-depth analyses that helped me give voice to thoughts otherwise unheard. For example, it was possible to find out what immigrants meant by “Americanization” and why many actually embraced particular aspects of the idea. I was able to give second-generation individuals a platform to speak for themselves. While one historian lamented that she “wanted to know what working people of the era actually said about their ethnic benefit societies” but could not, by relying on group-generated documents, I was able to learn what they said and to hear it in a way that provides a vivid, yet complex, picture.¹²

Finally, this focused approach helps counter an unsettling trend in recent historical scholarship. The stress on cultural history, together with investigations that fall into the category of “whiteness” studies, seems to be sliding backward, away from the late-twentieth-century attempt to investigate issues from inside ethnic communities. In essence, researchers are slighting materials produced by ethnic groups in favor of suppositions about how first- and second-generation Americans perceived their world. Unfortunately, more and more, commentators are returning to the traditional inclination of speaking for immigrants and their children without giving them a voice. The investigation offered here rests on the premise that it is essential to focus on how immigrants and their offspring interpreted issues, and, in light of their experiences, what battles *they* felt were worth fighting and how *they* waged them.

This work is a conscious attempt to look at the contemporary world from within ethnic communities and thus can be characterized as history from the inside out.

Given the burgeoning scholarship on "race," any discussion aimed at providing a perspective on new immigrant America must give some attention to terminology. Scholars have perceptively demonstrated that modern-day understandings of "ethnicity" are inadequate for fully depicting the history of the new immigrant experience. Perceptions, and especially rankings, of white new immigrants, they remind us, were racial.¹³ Nevertheless, this study employs the terms "ethnic," "ethnic group," and "ethnicity" because, despite the objections some scholars have been raising, from the vantage point of the turn-of-the-century new immigrants and their offspring, these terms are appropriate.¹⁴ "New immigrant" is also used because it was *the* term that contemporaries regularly used to identify individuals from southern and eastern Europe; it was universally employed to differentiate between them and the earlier immigrant groups from northern and western Europe. By convention, the descriptions "old" and "new" applied to Europeans and excluded those from Asia, Mexico, and elsewhere. It would be ahistorical not to employ terms that contemporaries used and understood.¹⁵

Ethnic activism is a focal point of this analysis. As used here, ethnic activism denotes two types of activities. First, it means actions undertaken by individuals to forward their own group's interests; second, it includes collective actions—undertaken as *an ethnic body*—by members of a group for purposes that could promote but also transcend the particular interests of their own nationality. As happened with nativism, ethnic activism could recede from the national scene, become an undercurrent in American society, and under certain circumstances boil to the surface again.¹⁶ This activism was fueled in part by persons committed to preserving separate ethnic identities but was dependent on stirring ethnic sentiments within the larger community.

The beginning and ending points for this work were determined by the fact that both world wars were high points of ethnic activism. Each apex was marked by rhetoric, a frenzy of coordinated activities, and agendas that went beyond the parochial concerns of ordinary immigrants and their offspring. The substantive analysis falls into three chronological periods, but the story is told in two parts. Part I, "The Transatlantic Years," which includes Chapters 1 through 3, examines the period spanning World War I to the Immigration Act of 1924. During this early transatlantic phase, Old World issues captured the interest of

ethnic activists and inspired wartime activities. For Slovaks, homeland politics continued to exert an influence as they tried to fashion a distinct identity. The twin effects of the 1924 immigration law, which stigmatized eastern and southern Europeans and effectively stopped immigration from their native lands, accelerated an already detectable shift from an emphasis on homeland matters to a concern with the American scene.

Part II, "Turning Inward," covers the two decades after 1924 and carries the story into World War II. Chapters 4 through 7 explore the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. During these years, in what can be described as a quiescent period, ethnic activism lost its national-international political focus and turned inward to address nagging problems of group survival and achieving respectability in a heterogeneous society. There was a heightened stress on the ideological components of an American identity. Nevertheless, in this period activism receded into an undertow of community activities and nationally based campaigns to sustain an ethnic consciousness. With input by the second generation, the period saw a reassessment of what made up an ethnic identity and a shifting emphasis from language retention to pride in ancestry. In the 1930s, hardships engendered by the Great Depression, especially the intensely personal impact at the community level and on local fraternal lodges, nurtured an ethnic activism that reached across generational lines as well as beyond nationality. While scholars have typically focused on ethnic involvement in the labor movement, this work investigates collective actions to get federal social-insurance legislation for the elderly and America's laboring classes enacted. In essence, class and ethnic interests converged to spark ethnic activism on behalf of the larger society.

Finally, Chapter 8 shows how ethnic activism in the United States surged forth in the 1940s as part of the unified campaign behind America's war effort. Homeland issues actually generated this resurgence on the eve of World War II. Wartime unity campaigns, which acknowledged but coincidentally downplayed ethnicity in favor of stressing a national identity, were nevertheless beholden to the country's persistent ethnic diversity and to the ongoing relevance of ethnicity for both the foreign and native born.

The methodology for this investigation was shaped in part by a recognition that America's ethnic populations had two levels: a national and a local. Ethnic organizations and newspapers, which reached out to a dispersed public and were run by people dedicated to the group's broader political, economic, or social interests, made up the national level. The local plane, which consisted of small towns as well as big cities

where ordinary immigrants and their offspring lived, was more demographically and socially diversified.

Since this work postulates that, when analyzing the dynamics behind manifestations of ethnicity, it is more accurate to speak of "activists" than "leaders," a brief comment about ethnic leadership is imperative. Although intensive studies of ethnic leadership have been few, the historical literature is replete with wide-ranging generalizations.¹⁷ The tendency has been to equate articulate individuals with leaders. Consequently, newspaper editors and the elite, often educated individuals, have been assigned leadership status. Those who became organizational officers have been similarly anointed. Typically, however, their rise to the top echelons of an organization was the result of career decisions to align themselves with ethnic organizations rather than a popularly based rise through the ranks. An emphasis on articulate, visible personalities slights committed individuals at the local level who were responsible for taking the lead in promoting ethnic causes. This work thus joins company with the conclusion that "some men and women who were perceived as ethnic leaders by the surrounding society might be viewed much more ambivalently *within* the ethnic community."¹⁸ An underlying premise is that, within the framework of defining leaders as individuals who "exercise decisive influence over others within a context of obligation or common interest," many national officers were not leaders even though they could reach a nationwide audience via the ethnic press.¹⁹ It is therefore more accurate to speak of activists than of leaders. Such an approach transcends class, occupation, generation, gender, and locale.

Persons who held a national office in ethnic organizations, though, were individuals in the business of thinking about ethnicity. During the interwar era, these activists worked to ensure group survival as well as to promote broadly based political issues. Theorizing about their group's national identity, these articulate activists set down the terms of discourse and provided the intellectual leavening for ethnic activism. In this study, they are the national activists.

At the same time, in immigrant enclaves there were ethnically committed men and women who did not necessarily fit conventionally accepted notions of "leaders." In the local arena, these people tried to ensure an enduring group presence in communities characterized by ethnic diversity. One way they attempted to achieve their goal was by holding annual nationality days. To get immigrants and their children to attend these yearly manifestations of ethnicity, enthusiasts had to

develop publicity that would resonate with the larger populace. Thus, trying to influence ordinary Slovaks, committed activists created a body of literature that, when carefully scrutinized, becomes a basis for discovering rank-and-file perspectives. This publicity as well as the programs for Slovak Days, which became commonplace in American communities during the 1930s, reveals how ordinary immigrants and their children were coping with life in a heterogeneous society. They show how local activists developed a strategy of using American popular culture to perpetuate an interest in ethnic affairs. To impress Slovak youths as well as "other nationalities," including "Americans," they also routinely incorporated America's national symbols into ethnic undertakings.

Taking a closer look at intergenerational relationships sheds new light on old arguments about alleged conflicts between parents and their American-oriented offspring. By and large, scholars have remained captivated by—and, indeed, captive to—what Marcus Lee Hansen called the second-generation "problem." Historians in general have laid too much emphasis on the notion of parents wishing to remember and children wanting to forget.²⁰ An underlying point emerging from this study is that parental attitudes were influenced by premigration culture, their American experience, and realities of the society where they now lived. As a consequence, not all parents were equally dedicated to cultural preservation.

It was likewise true that the second generation was monolithic in neither its demographic composition nor its attitudes about ancestral roots. Letting youths express their views about the language-based criteria of ethnicity leads to a more refined understanding of the second generation. Slovak as well as other new immigrant youths did, by and large, become Americanized. This study considers, however, those "Americanized" youths who did not reject their ancestral heritage and instead joined ethnic organizations or participated in ethnically defined undertakings, including organized leisure-time activities. It contends that these young men and women ultimately became part of a core of activists willing, when circumstances moved them, to promote ethnic causes.

It would be an exercise in excess to discuss all the secondary literature informing this investigation. Still, to clarify the perspective this study offers, some general comments about historiographical trends, particularly in the recent past, are in order. Since the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars have engaged in penetrating, often animated discussions about "ethnicity." Disputation has centered on the genuineness and relevance of ethnicity. For example, was the ethnic revival

of the 1960s and 1970s a bona fide reawakening or a forced resuscitation? Theories about ethnicity have ranged from averring its authenticity to dismissing it as symbolic, a matter of expedient choice, or a contrived imperative grounded in a chauvinistic self-deception.²¹ Trying to explain its persistence, scholars have argued that the flexibility of ethnic groups has allowed ethnicity to endure in invented forms.²² The debate has also included passing judgment on the effects as well as the desirability of ethnic persistence in America. Some commentators have expressed concern about the potentially adverse impact that emphasizing cultural particularities can have on national unity.²³ In a similar vein, scholars of immigration have grappled with whether group studies were fragmenting historical scholarship.²⁴

Useful as these debates were—and remain—in compelling society at large and students of American history to engage in meaningful discourse, the purpose here is to avoid wading into the quagmire of ethnic theory.²⁵ Instead of trying to answer the ever elusive question of how deeply persons have internalized their ethnic identity, this analysis looks at collective expressions of ethnicity. It is therefore not an intellectual foray into what constituted ethnicity or into the legitimacy or authenticity of its expressions. One intent here is to identify what helped ignite periodic manifestations of ethnicity and, moreover, to assess why in the first part of the twentieth century ethnic activism surfaced in times of patriotic ardor.

The relationship between ethnicity and the imperative of national unity has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Indeed, discussions that investigate the thorny issue of America's national identity and the civic ideals embellishing it have produced insightful as well as provocative works. Explorations from the perspective of intellectual history in particular have enriched our understanding of America's national identity and some of the popular thinking about it.²⁶ Following methodology similar to intellectual histories, analysts have also examined rhetoric and public discourse to demonstrate how the political language of Americanism contributed to the transformation of immigrant generations into "Americans."²⁷ Trying to explain the significant impact that democratic ideology has had in forging an American identity, scholars have tended to downplay ethnicity as a significant force in times of national crises, and especially during World War II.²⁸ When it comes to assessing the connection between ethnicity and national identity, however, intellectual histories and studies of public discourse provide only a limited dimension of a complicated story. To achieve completeness, we

must also consider the viewpoint of ordinary people. Exploring the interwar era from the perspective of new immigrants and their offspring reveals a dynamic link between the embracing of democratic ideology and the shaping of ethnic identities, between “being American” and becoming Americans proud of their ancestry.

A complex interplay of factors fed the ethnic impulse that flowed through the decades spanning the two world wars. Examining the content of national and locally generated rhetoric from the early 1920s through the 1930s, however, shows that Slovaks, like other new immigrants, were haunted by the stigma of inferiority inflicted by American society. Community-based efforts such as sponsoring nationality days and athletic teams thus were often promoted by using the rationale of impressing “others.” This preoccupation with making an impression on “others” also meant creating an image that the second generation—the Americanized “younger element”—could identify with.

The emphasis on “others” bears on a wide range of issues, including the pertinency of “whiteness” or becoming Caucasian in the minds of ordinary immigrants. Implicit in the recent scholarship known as “whiteness” studies is the supposition that immigrants and the second generation were somehow aware of and moved by a desire to overcome an ascribed status as not-yet-white. It has even been asserted that “new immigrants and their children had to claw their way into the white race.”²⁹ This is an outsider’s view. Turning around to look at the situation from *within* ethnic communities, which comprised males and females of all ages and different generations, suggests that becoming white or Caucasian was not part of their aspirations during the interwar era. Their quest was far more complicated. Historical experiences and contemporary circumstances caused new immigrants and their children to view the world through the kaleidoscope of ethnic diversity, not through a lens of multihued whites. That they strove to manifest their whiteness is indeed an onlooker’s interpretation. Let us now turn to take a look at the interwar world from a “new immigrant” perspective.

1 Hyphenates and Patriots

An Ethnic Perspective on the Great War

ON SUNDAY, JULY 8, 1917, in Whiting, Indiana, Slovak immigrants and their children celebrated Slovak Day. Speeches, singing, dancing, and feasting punctuated that year's activities in much the same way they had during previous Slovak celebrations in this small industrial town. Participants commemorated Cyril and Methodius, the apostles credited with bringing Christianity to the Slavic world in the ninth century. Because of their tremendous success in ancient Slovak lands, Slovaks laid claim to these august personages. In their publicity, local promoters called for establishing July 5, the feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius, as an annual nationwide event. Other nationalities, especially the Irish, had a national day, and so, too, should Slovaks, the notice proclaimed. Such fervor leavened with pride was spawned by the prospect that the Slovak homeland would emerge from the war a nation, no longer just a hazy fragment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This July day was dedicated to furthering the struggle for a liberated Slovakia. Speakers called on Slovaks to assist efforts to extricate their homeland from Hungarian control, and zealous individuals solicited financial support for people in the Old Country.¹

This was, nevertheless, wartime America, a time to demonstrate unflinching loyalty to the United States. One commentator unabashedly combined Old World ties to new-land patriotism by urging Slovaks to demonstrate their love for America, whose help he said was necessary to secure the liberation of Slovaks in Europe. At least one non-Slovak took the opportunity to remind these Slavic immigrants of their patriotic duty and simultaneously to garner financial support for the war effort. A representative of the Red Cross told revelers that contributing to that organization was the best way to show their loyalty to America. The day's activities, which began with the celebration of the Roman Catholic mass, ended with a choir's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" followed by the collective singing of "Hej Slováci," the unofficial Slovak anthem. Participants then turned to an evening of traditional folk dancing. For some people, attending the festivities had a

small price tag. Passing the hat grossed nearly \$54. Slightly more than half went to the "million dollar fund," a collection the Slovak League of America had established toward a "free Slovakia." The remainder was given to the Red Cross.² Throughout the summer, Slovaks elsewhere organized similar ethnic affairs. A year later, people who had attended these 1917 nationality events would probably join in "Loyalty Day," a countrywide observance on July 4, 1918. As part of that year's Fourth of July activities, Americans, especially the foreign born, were called upon to exhibit their patriotism.³ Linking exhibitions of patriotism and displays of ethnicity was a leitmotif of wartime America.

In an abnormal time, these Slovaks probably represented the typical. Despite all the anti-hyphenate oratory, open expressions of interest in the Old World were sanctioned and even nurtured by U.S. foreign policy and Wilsonian rhetoric. In addition, all the patriotically charged bravado and mounting pressure for immigrants to manifest their "Americanism" actually required nationality groups to highlight their ethnicity. It became a paradox of the wartime era that ethnic activities, both individual and group, were used as measures of allegiance to America. The Great War, therefore, gave rise to an aggressive activism among America's ethnic populations.

It is within the context of both the widespread hostility toward the foreign born and the idealism that characterized wartime rhetoric, especially America's foreign policies, that an ethnic perspective on the war emerges. Moving step by step from efforts promoted by ethnic activists at the national level to community-based undertakings provides an especially illuminating picture of wartime America. Through their actions, Slovaks revealed an interest in the homeland, demonstrated a loyalty to America, and reflected a concern about how others viewed them. Their experience shows that, after anti-hyphenism evolved into 100 percent Americanism, people could still be both hyphenates and patriots.

EVEN BEFORE THE ONSET of the Great War, nettlesome European politics aroused anxiety in America about "hyphenates," persons defined as having divided loyalties. They stood accused of putting the interests of other countries before those of the United States. Indeed, as early as May 1914, Woodrow Wilson pinpointed the "hyphen" as an undesirable element of American life and politics. In a speech dedicating a statue of Commodore John Barry, a native of Ireland who had fought in the American Revolution, the president disdainfully asserted that "some Americans need hyphens in their names, because only part of them has

come over." Wilson maintained that when the "whole" person in "heart and thought" comes to America, "the hyphen drops." An irritation with Irish Americans who were agitating in favor of home rule for Ireland no doubt prompted Wilson to take his first potshot at the "hyphen." The president shared with his audience his own "infallible test of a genuine American." Only a person who "when he votes or when he acts or when he fights his heart and his thought are nowhere but in the center of the emotions and the purposes and the policies of the United States" could pass. After war broke out in Europe, Wilson apparently believed that fewer people could fare well on the exam. In December 1915, alleging that some citizens "born under other flags" were pouring the "poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life," he urged Congress to enact repressive legislation.⁴ His call both reflected the contemporary temper and reinforced the chilling fact that the times were growing increasingly intolerant of the foreign born.

It was Theodore Roosevelt, however, who served as the era's leading popularizer of anti-hyphenism. Even though he spewed much venom toward German Americans, Roosevelt's anti-hyphenate assaults took aim at all nationalities.⁵ And when it came to hyphenates, Roosevelt did not speak softly. By the summer of 1915, he had openly targeted "the hyphenated American" as "a danger to the country."⁶ Later that same year, the former president ranted that people "who do not become Americans and nothing else are hyphenated Americans; and there ought to be no room for them in this country." Among the people for whom America most particularly had no room in 1914–1915 were those who attempted to influence American foreign policy and, more specifically, advocated measures at odds with the official position. Roosevelt, not one to shy away from bombast, accused "hyphenated Americans who terrorize American politicians by threats of the foreign vote" of engaging "in treason."⁷ During the 1916 presidential campaign, candidate Wilson sounded the same theme when he tagged the followers of an Irish American, who headed an organization supporting home rule for Ireland, as "disloyal Americans" and rejected their support.⁸ Seeking national solidarity and unqualified endorsement of American policies, Wilson, Roosevelt, and many others continually tried to equate "hyphenism" with "disloyalty." All this rhetoric reflected the basic reality that, given the country's heterogeneous population, an ocean of distance could not protect the United States from turmoil in Europe.

During the interim of declared neutrality, then, being disloyal was not limited to overt or even covert acts of treason. From the standpoint of

those insisting on national unity, disloyalty could merely entail trying to influence American foreign policy or taking positions that diverged from the official line. Implicit in the attack on hyphenism was the demand that “the foreign-born population . . . in word and deed . . . must show that in very fact it has renounced allegiance to every . . . foreign government.”⁹ As the United States ambled from neutrality to war, Americans would give the foreign born abundant opportunity to show this very fact, especially as anti-hyphenism gave way to 100 percent Americanism.

Wilson and Roosevelt coupled their assaults on hyphenism with short discourses on “Americanism,” a nebulous mixture of hazy principles and duties. Wilson postulated that “Americanism consists in utterly believing in the principles of America and putting them first, as above anything that might . . . come into competition.” Calling “Americanism . . . a matter of the spirit and of the soul,” Roosevelt shared that view.¹⁰ Constructed at best out of vague notions, Americanism nevertheless contained features that could captivate the high-minded and the sincerely patriotic. For despite the increasing fascination with eugenics and the touted biological roots of cultural traits, “being American” was intrinsically linked to adherence to principles. Throughout the war years, as more people jumped onto the Americanization bandwagon, the concept of Americanism would prove its elasticity as it stretched to meet the needs of both the chauvinistic and the sincere. Despite the high-pitched rhetoric, though, during the early years of the Great War, achieving 100 percent Americanism did not become the articulated national aim. Squelching hyphenated Americanism commanded the agenda.¹¹

The constant attacks on hyphenism reflected a popular animosity toward the persistence of ethnic enclaves and institutions in the United States. Speaking to newly naturalized citizens in the spring of 1915, Wilson proclaimed that “America does not consist of groups.”¹² In reality, however, he knew that it did. That was the root of the problem. As war engulfed Europe, many of America’s immigrants turned their attention to events in their homelands. This interest stirred fears that the country’s foreign inhabitants had not only a sentimental attachment but, perhaps, a loyalty to their native lands. The concern immigrants displayed about happenings in Europe bothered many Americans. Consequently, in addition to denouncing hyphenism, a new emphasis was laid on “Americanizing” the foreign born, on turning immigrants into “Americans.” The president’s address acted as a catalyst to patriotically

inspired Americans who were becoming increasingly distraught about the continued existence of “foreign colonies,” as contemporaries called them. Their commitment to Americanizing immigrants and drawing native-born Americans into this effort led to “Americanization Day” in 1915. A nationwide event scheduled for the Fourth of July, the day would honor naturalized Americans and those who had declared their intention to become citizens. Promoters envisioned it as a time when both the native and foreign born could jointly and “fittingly express . . . their patriotism and loyalty to America.”¹³ More and more, Americans were equating patriotism with visible manifestations, and they wanted immigrants to accommodate this caprice. People were increasingly craving naturalization ceremonies imbued with symbols that would impress the country’s foreign born with the meaning of citizenship. Americanization Day contributed to the growing national mania for what Frances Kellor called “cooperative patriotism,” public avowals of loyalty.¹⁴

The National Americanization Day Committee, headed by Kellor, launched a massive campaign to publicize the event, especially among the foreign born. Posters were plastered in railway stations throughout the country. More than 7,600 placards were displayed in companies employing immigrants, and nearly 6,500 were given to cities for their festivities. Although nationally orchestrated, for participants Americanization Day was a local event. Demonstrations took place in 107 cities, towns, and communities scattered throughout the forty-eight states. Kellor raved that in many places people engaged in the activities as members of nationality groups; immigrants displayed their “national colors” and sang their songs. Such displays of ethnicity did not disturb national organizers. On the contrary, paying tribute to the country’s ethnic diversity, under the slogan “Many Peoples, But One Nation,” the events ostensibly aimed to promote better understanding between immigrants and native-born Americans. Above all, though, these were inflated shows of patriotism. In graphic posters and multi-ethnic parades, the flag, America’s sacred emblem, figured prominently. Admonishing “Americans” for their indifference to immigrants and to the significance of Independence Day, Kellor pointed out that “it was symbolic . . . that in some localities, Americans forgot to decorate their homes with the Stars and Stripes, but from the shacks of nearby laborers they floated triumphantly.”¹⁵ To her mind, displaying the American flag was the mark of a true patriot.

National Americanization Day 1915 helped reinforce the criteria for assessing patriotism. Foreign-born persons could demonstrate their

Americanism and simultaneously confirm the collective loyalty of their nationality by participating in patriotic exercises as members of a specific ethnic group. Giving homage to the American flag by waving it in parades, hanging it from one's abode, or wearing a reproduction on a pin were declarations of patriotism. Although the United States was not yet at war in 1915, the foundation for how the foreign born could prove loyalty was being laid. Attacks on hyphenism notwithstanding and growing pressure to Americanize notwithstanding, links between American patriotism and ethnic identity were being forged. As nationality groups paraded through the streets, Americans were watching pageantry spawned by a combination of patriotic fervor and ethnic diversity.

While the national coordinators patted themselves on the back, proclaimed the endeavor a huge success, and surged forward with their Americanization campaign, the whole event underscored the significance of local activities. Following the countrywide Fourth of July activities, local Americanization efforts exploded. The number and variety of agencies involved in Americanizing immigrants immediately mushroomed and continued to expand in communities throughout the United States.¹⁶ The National Americanization Committee touted an array of programs—citizenship and English-language classes, surveys, lectures, teacher training at institutions of higher education—as “by-products” of the Fourth of July extravaganza. Snippets about local efforts sprinkled the “Record of Progress” sections of the committee’s official organ.¹⁷ Attempting to encourage naturalization, which they were convinced would create a united citizenry, Americanizers directed particular energy toward teaching English and instilling the principles of Americanism and citizenship. Taking its message directly to the foreign born, the National Americanization Committee exerted subtle pressure as it tried to cajole immigrants by appealing to their pragmatism. The committee’s “America First” poster pointed to the practical reasons for learning English, attending night school, and becoming a citizen. This would mean “a better opportunity and better home in America . . . a better job . . . a better chance for your children.”¹⁸ Some enthusiasts, focusing on the workplace, took a potentially intimidating approach. The Detroit Board of Commerce launched a campaign to get its members to persuade their immigrant workers to learn English and become citizens.¹⁹

Exaggerated exuberance by the committee notwithstanding, the range of activities initiated in cities and towns throughout the country suggests that foreign-born people could not avoid encountering an Americanization agency of one ilk or another.²⁰ Even if they could not

read English, the Americanization Committee's pictorial propaganda—such as its “Many Peoples, One Nation” poster with the flag majestically waving—surely caught the eyes of some immigrants. Whether the poster's banner really inspired individuals is a question with an elusive answer, but placards with the Stars and Stripes prominently depicted did contribute to the age's patriotic ardor and reinforced the significance of displaying this national symbol.

While Americanizers labored at the street level, national spokespersons continued to assault “hyphenated Americanism.” Amid his anti-hyphenism oratory, though, President Wilson sent conflicting messages—or, at least, messages that ethnic activists could interpret to suit their respective purposes. Wilson's pronouncements in the spring of 1916 that “every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live” actually buoyed the spirits of ethnic nationalists who were already viewing the European war as an opportunity to gain independence for their homelands.²¹ Before the United States entered the hostilities, however, the signals were at no time more contradictory than during the 1916 presidential campaign. The Democratic Party platform dealt with hyphenism by not mentioning the specific term. Instead, it included a plank on “Americanism” and denounced people who, in seeking to advance the welfare of a “foreign power,” disregarded or conspired against America's interests.

Despite the fact that candidate Wilson exploited the hyphenism issue and took swipes at individuals who were allegedly putting concern for their homeland ahead of the welfare of the United States, he also enunciated sympathy for the aspirations of subject peoples. In October, he shared with a Cincinnati audience how he was emotionally affected by individuals who came to his office with appeals to help “those unorganized people who have no political standing in Europe.”²² Although this speech specifically mentioned Armenians and the people of Poland, to ardent nationalists Wilson's comments could be taken as implicitly embracing other peoples as well. In 1916, the president also proclaimed Lithuanian, Armenian, and Syrian days. Intended as occasions for soliciting contributions from the general public for overseas relief, these days nonetheless were ethnic events that vitalized the respective immigrant communities. Designating special days and receiving envoys for nationalist causes into the White House emboldened ethnic groups.²³ Whether election-year ploys or not—and despite the anti-hyphen fervor—candidate Wilson espoused ideals that could not help but give heart to nationalist yearnings.

As the 1916 election faded into history, Wilson increasingly became the recognized proponent of the principle of self-determination. In January 1917, his vision for “peace without victory” embodied this fundamental idea. From his standpoint, a peace with no victors would still be one that achieved the restoration of Poland. The special treatment afforded Poland, together with Wilson’s idealistic rhetoric, motivated America’s other ethnic groups to organize efforts aimed at persuading the administration to expand self-determination to include eastern Europe’s other subject nationalities.²⁴ In the final analysis, the president’s actual intent was less important than how ethnic activists chose to construe his words. Hence, despite all the anti-hyphen hyperbole, Wilson’s oratory had the effect of encouraging partisans to work on behalf of their motherlands, to be hyphenates.²⁵

Turning to look more closely at America’s “foreign colonies” and how they were responding to the war in Europe explains why government policies, together with rhetoric grounded in democratic ideals, helped make people both hyphenates and patriots. Moreover, a view from inside new immigrant America confirms that, for all its chauvinism, the language of anti-hyphenism was rooted to a degree in reality. Americanizers were right: immigrants had been forming their own ethnic enclaves and institutions; foreign-born persons did maintain attachments to their homelands. Indeed, well before the United States became involved in April 1917, the Great War was animating ethnic America. In fact, even before the assassin fired the fatal bullet at Sarajevo, happenings in Europe were already fanning flames of nationalism that during previous decades had smoldered in confined segments of America’s ethnic populations.

While Wilson was scolding Irish Americans in the spring of 1914, former residents of central and eastern Europe were similarly engrossed in their homelands. This interest in Old World politics was blatantly expressed when Count Michael Károlyi, a Hungarian nationalist and leader of the political party advocating independence from Austria, visited the United States. His two tours stirred internal friction but also avid enthusiasm among Hungarian immigrants. They expressed this fervor in parades and public displays featuring Hungarian folk costumes, flags, and banners.²⁶ As Hungarians were setting aside differences in order to advance a united front behind Károlyi’s nationalist program, his presence was injecting vigor into what had been a feeble Slovak nationalism in the United States. Activities sponsored in his honor ignited spirited public protests by Slovaks and generated efforts