

**THE GERMAN LANGUAGE NEWSPRESS OF
OF PENNSYLVANIA
DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

by

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A significant movement of immigration in the colonial history of America was initiated in 1683 with the arrival of a group of German settlers at the Port of Philadelphia. Personal freedom, particularly with respect to religious convictions, and the economic opportunities which the system of government offered colonists in Pennsylvania were the bases for attracting the largest number of non-British settlers. It has been estimated that at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War the colonies were composed of ten to twelve per cent German stock. Pennsylvania had the largest concentration; approximately one third of its population was either native German or German-American.

In the course of the 18th century the more adventurous German settlers pushed out into the frontier areas of the colony, however, the territory of southeastern Pennsylvania with its fertile farm lands and relative proximity to Philadelphia was to exercise a magnetic force in becoming the heartland of German-American culture in colonial America and for American history in general.

Benjamin Franklin, the first citizen of Philadelphia, had little enthusiasm about the proportion of Germans relative to the total population of the colony and to the potential influence they might exercise in the political and economic affairs of Pennsylvania. Yet as an astute businessman he did not fail to recognize the opportunity for financial gain attainable through these Germans. Consequently, he established the first German language newspaper in America, the *Philadelphische Zeitung* on June 10, 1732.¹ In comparison to modern

newspapers this one is sparse indeed, but in form or content did not differ essentially from English language counterparts; it was a four page edition, six and one half by nine inches. The venture was short lived. Actually the German-American newspress traces its origin to Christoph Saur's establishment in 1739 of the *Hoch-Deutsch Pennsylvanische Geschicht-Schreiber* in Germantown.

The Saur family continued to publish a German language paper in the Philadelphia area up to and during the Revolutionary War, a period which saw the rise of six additional journals. From these emerged America's most significant non-English language newspress. In the period from 1776-1783 five different German language papers were published in Philadelphia; one in Germantown; one in Lancaster.² A German language religious press simultaneously flourished in Allentown, Bethlehem, Germantown, Lancaster, and Philadelphia but concerned itself in general rather with religious issues than with the volatile political, economic, and social questions of the day.

John Joseph Stoudt's study furnishes an excellent background for the general orientation of the German newspress at the time of the Revolution; however, no systematic analysis of these papers with respect to their orientation to and influence upon the period has yet been undertaken.³ Stoudt's study emphasizes the different religious denominations among the Germans which led to the establishment of two distinct types of newspapers, namely those of the Saur press mainly in Germantown and those of their competitors, i. e. a press supported essentially by Lutheran and Reformed Germans and the Saur press supported by the various German sects.

The popular belief concerning the political climate of America at the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain of a nation unified by common ideals and goals and prepared to fight a powerful oppressor for the protection of its rights seems grossly inaccurate. The colonists seem to have been divided into three groups of about equal numbers: one third against the British, the Whigs; one third sympathizing with

the British and the concept of empire, the Tories; one third indifferent to the whole event.⁴ For the Whigs to be successful in their efforts for political independence from Great Britain they would need to attain as much popular support as possible; in Pennsylvania it would be the Germans who held the balance and whose support would have a major effect upon the outcome of political and military events. Through an examination of the German language newspapers, German-American sentiment and reaction to the Revolution and their effectiveness in the cause during those years can be more clearly understood.

Of the seven German language newspapers of the day only one held a Tory policy, Christoph and Peter Saur's *Der Pennsylvanische Staats-Courier, oder Einlaufende Wöchentliche Nachrichten* of Philadelphia, final successor of their grandfather's important *Die Germantowner Zeitung* (initially *Pennsylvanische Berichte*). When the elder Saur died in 1758 his Germantown paper was continued by his son, Christoph until 1776. In general during the 1760's the four-page editions are all quite similar in format; page one is devoted almost exclusively to international news of a political nature with such objective reporting that the personal views of the editor do not emerge; page two displays a similar pattern, whereas pages three and four are devoted essentially to advertisements, illustrated by numerous wood-cuts. As a result of the few copies available from the 1760's a determination of its attitude towards the march of political events in the colonies prior to the Revolution remains speculative; in the 1770's extensive domestic reporting covers the growing movement towards separation from Great Britain in an objective tone. A technique enjoying wide popularity not only in the Saur press but in journalism of the day in general consists of printing extracts from letters pertaining to significant events. Saur prints, for example, such an extract from a letter penned by a British army officer in New York to a friend in London to report all America is inflamed due to the export of taxed tea from England; the colonists seem determined to deny all

vessels transporting tea the right to land; in fact the sons of liberty threaten to burn all such ships (April 21, 1774). During the year various letters of a similar nature concerning the explosive issue of the tax on tea can be found. Although the Saur press is not only anxious about the relations with Great Britain—its deeply religious foundation necessarily led it to consider moral questions such as slavery which it condemned as un-Christian (Sept. 22, 1774)—the British-American controversy receives wider coverage than any other single matter.

To call Christoph Saur II a Tory or a British-sympathizer, though, does not seem justified in light of his journalism or his orientation to life.⁵ As long as he himself continued to publish the paper a pro-British and anti-American tone cannot be discerned. Rather Saur seems anxious to be objective and neutral in his reports: parliamentary debates on American colonial policy are numerous and usually include pro and con viewpoints of M.P.'s regarding the policy of the British government; reports concerning the closing of the harbor of Boston, the issue which seems to have pushed other newspapers into anti-British hysteria, is simply objectively reported. More evidence points to his hope of avoiding military confrontation through compromises than to a pro-British attitude; how subdued is the tone of an article dealing with the mistreatment of a colonist in Boston by the British military: "Wir bitten Euer Excellenz, dass der bereits zu grosse Bruch zwischen Grossbritannien und dieser Provinz nicht durch solche Brutalität Eurer Truppen vergrössert werden möge." Much space in the Saur paper is devoted to efforts of influential critics of royal colonial policy in England toward an amelioration of conflicting views between London and America. Completely objective reporting is encountered in reports of military engagements early in the war and not until the paper is taken over by his sons, Christoph III and Peter, does it become the organ for Tory views. The younger Saur printed the newspaper in Philadelphia during the British occupation and although only few copies have survi-

ved, its loyalist, i.e. pro-British orientation, is clearly evident. For example, the issue of March 12, 1777 carries an article on page one in two and one half columns praising King George and the war against the American rebels coupled with a sharp warning against treason, i.e. treason against England.⁶ A conversation between two farmers refers to the Americans as rebels and as an unsavory band; they will all become slaves of Congress if the British and Hessian troops do not save Americans from such a fate (May 6, 1778). Perhaps one of the saddest fates of the revolutionary years is that of Christoph Saur II, the deeply religious pacifist whose energies were directed toward the avoidance of armed conflicts, but who, as the victim of hate and intolerance, lost all his material possessions and had his high reputation severely infringed upon.⁷

During the British occupation of Philadelphia, Frantz Bailey edited and published *Das Pennsylvanische Zeitung-Blatt* in Lancaster from February 4, 1778 to June 24, 1778. Knauss observes it printed almost exclusively news of the war; although essentially correct, this furnishes no substantive information.⁸ General Washington uses its columns when communicating with the German farmers of Pennsylvania, asking them to supply much needed grain to his winter headquarters. He also announces public food markets for the army and furnishes a list of prices, a visible attempt to halt the spiralling inflation during the war.

Propaganda efforts are directed toward discrediting the British in America and at home; for example, General Howe's financial requests to the Americans for the sustenance of captured American prisoners of war receives wide publicity. Protests made by the American Congress to British authorities because of alleged maltreatment of American prisoners are extensive; in fact, to show American benevolence the paper reports Congress' willingness to send money and clothing to the British to care for the Americans they hold captive. News from London emphasizes the military's responsibility in pursuing this war with an eye to enhancement of British

national honor. Bailey consistently notes the dissent and general lack of support for the American war among the British, an attitude he claims to have been extensive among the people as well as among political leaders as Lord Coventry, Lord Chatham, Lord Camden. Lord North's speech requesting a peace conference and recognition of American independence appears as a supplement to the edition of April 1, 1778 and offers a clever contrast to the King's speech before the House of Lords in which his vanity and ignorance of American events seem quite recognizable. He earnestly believes his policies toward America enjoy wide support in Great Britain and aim at ending the bloodshed by having "my American colonies" return to their patriotic duty of supporting the crown (Feb. 11, 1778).

Numerous letters are also printed here as means of propaganda to demonstrate popular support for the war in the colonies and to chastise the tyrant, Great Britain. Curious is the column "From Rebel Newspapers" which carries items from the Saur press, called "rebel" because of its pro-British sentiment; the Saur press ran a similar column, but there "rebel" referred to the anti-British press. Bailey affords news of American military victories extensive coverage, whereas international news remains a minor aspect unless it directly affects America as, for example, the development of events in France and her growing discord with Great Britain.

After the British evacuation of Philadelphia competition from a rejuvenated German language newspaper there must have forced Bailey to abandon this journalistic enterprise.

Concerning the newspaper which chronologically made its appearance next on the scene, *Die Pennsylvanische Gazette, oder der Allgemeine Americanische Zeitungschreiber* in 1779, little can be said since only the initial issue still exists. If meant as a replacement for the now defunct Saur newspaper, a reversal in political opinion is obvious.⁹ The extant issue heralds the alliance with France and gives a German translation of the pact. It also discusses the difficulties incurred with respect to the paper money the American Congress

issued and asks the citizens to have faith in this money since God will always support a just cause and such is the American one. The editor, John Dunlap, balances national and international news, almost a novel feature of the German language newspapers of the day, as indicated by the lengthy report on page one entitled "Berlin" which reports of the strained relations between Prussia and Austria. He places their conflict also within its historical development.

Published from 1779-1781, the *Philadelphisches Staatsregister* continues the staunch support of the struggling new nation encountered in all other German-American newspapers except in the Saur press. The element of propaganda is visibly stronger here than in its above mentioned compatriots; for example, by means of letters General Washington praises the victories of General Wayne; other letters refer to the moral and military strength of the new American nation; still others, such as those from two British officers, Commodore George Collier and General William Tyron, are employed to purposely convey the scorn and bitterness the British supposedly hold towards the rebels and all who support them; even British threats of methodical and immanent physical destruction aim at inflaming hatred toward Britain and continuing staunch German-American support for the war. The destruction in the towns of Farfield and Norwalk, perpetrated by the British troops evacuating Philadelphia, demonstrates it maintains, this British policy of terror. A lengthy article covering an entire page on August 9, 1779 enthusiastically praises American freedom and Congress' course of action. Patriotic support for the American cause is evoked especially since a letter from a European to his American friend relates England has not yet been humbled enough to grant America her freedom: "Die zuneigung von ganz Europa zu unserer sache als die sache der freyheit..." is proudly proclaimed.¹⁰

A curious item, in the form of an extensive editorial, calls for a type of emergency legislation which would grant the government unlimited power. This paper feels the need for such legislation in light of the present danger; however,

it is warned, such a law should not be incorporated into a constitution because of possible misuse, especially in time of peace.

The reporting of war events tends to favor the Americans; international news remains scant and usually has reference to the American Revolution as, for example, the attempts of France to bring about peace.

This short-lived venture, oriented almost exclusively to the one issue of the war, was succeeded by the *Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz*, edited initially and for the remaining war years by Melchior Steiner, who together with Carl Cist had published the *Philadelphisches Staatsregister*. During the war years it exhibits a high level of journalism and overcomes the provincialism indicative of the above mentioned newspapers, exclusive, of course, of the Saur press.¹¹ International news coverage, similar to Dunlap's enterprise, consists only of events which directly affect the American Revolution; in fact, various editions devote even more extensive coverage to it than to domestic events. Propagandizing, now more sophisticated, spans a wide range from reports of protests in England against the war, such as petitions sent to the King from inhabitants of Westminster to end the hostilities, to praise for the high ideals America represents, exemplified in a poem announcing the end of the year (December 26, 1781). And finally at the end of the war a plea for clemency permeates a fictitious conversation between Wilhelm Whig and Hans Tory in which Wilhelm demonstrates to his misguided friend the institution of royal office is only an historical development and a democracy is vastly superior; therefore they should now join together in this noble democratic experiment (June 3, 1783). By the summer of 1782 as the war enters its final phase a Christian moralizing tone becomes pronounced in numerous stories. Great Britain is regarded as a violator of morality because she disregards basic human rights (April 3, 1782). Of course, progress in the American military campaigns attracts Steiner's attention from the inception of the paper. The rumors of negotiations after

the summer of 1782 hold the interest of the editors, and extensive reporting of such events occurs.

The edition of March 13, 1782 is particularly noteworthy because of its defense of the German element among the colonists. Various letters prove the Germans to be hard working, reliable, and reasonable and reject negative comments directed against them by some English-Americans. In addition, German-Americans must stand together and preserve their culture and heritage otherwise it will become lost in their newly chosen country.

Reasons which impelled the writing of such an apology may be conjectured. Much must have been made of the thousands of German mercenary soldiers whom the King of England had hired for the war (even history books today dwell extensively on this); on the other hand, little is related of the thousands of German colonists fighting for General Washington or of the many high ranking German-American officers in his army or of the extensive support rendered Washington by the German-American farmers in supplying needed food or by the German-American pacifist sectarians who opened their homes and towns to care for the sick and wounded.¹² It has even been suggested that without the devoted efforts of the German-Americans the war against England could never have been brought to a successful conclusion.

The most extensive holdings of a German-American newspaper of the period are from Henry Miller's *Der Wöchentliche Pennsylvanische Staatsbote*. Since publication commenced in 1762 insight into the growing crisis between London and the American colonies with particular reference to the German-American element can be gained. Miller's extensive experience in printing and journalism in Europe and America afforded him the abilities to initiate a newspaper of superior quality.¹³ His staunch support for the American revolutionary movement manifests itself clearly and his abilities as a propagandist and apologist for the American cause in the German language seem not to have been surpassed by anyone else in the colonies. Due to the extensive distribution of his paper,

it was read not only in Pennsylvania but throughout the colonies, and its pronounced hostile tone toward British colonial policy, the revolutionary leaders must have been greatly indebted to him. He countered the influence of the Saur press and helped solidify the active support of the German-Americans for the cause of American independence.

In the years before the outbreak of hostilities Miller constantly laments and rejects the forced servitude of American commerce to British political designs and her disregard of American attempts to ameliorate the situation; rather Britain refers to the American pleas as initiating from "einer missvergnügten Rotte" which must be forced to bend under the will of the crown. By 1773 sentiment for breaking with Great Britain permeates many articles and in 1774 anti-British reaction almost reaches hysterical proportion.¹⁴ The theme of taxation without representation demonstrates for Miller the lack of adherence and respect Great Britain pays to its tradition of liberty. In fact, because of this Britain is accused of raping an Englishman's birthright (June 21, 1774).¹⁵ A news item reprinted from a South Carolina paper entitled "Eintracht bringt Macht" claims America faces even a greater threat from England now than at the time of the Stamp Act; consequently all must band together to halt the arbitrary and despotic actions of the British government since America is not to become a vassal country or a slave, rather the embodiment of man's natural rights (July 19, 1774).

News of the Boston Massacre further serves to fan the flames of discontent as Miller brands the encounter blatant and premeditated murder of unarmed civilians. When the British government responds with the blockade of the Boston harbor, his reaction becomes still more vehement, expressing itself in hostile attacks upon British policy and supporting a complete boycott of any and all goods shipped from Great Britain. Those who do not comply with this boycott come in for bitter attacks and are labeled enemies of patriotism, willing to sell-out their country for several pieces of gold.

No opportunity is missed to praise America and its

promise for mankind; indicative is a letter written by an Englishman: "I am completely convinced that within 100 years North America will become the home of freedom and power and the refuge for those who love liberty and the protestant religion. Were I not so old, I would immigrate with my family."¹⁶

Initial reaction to the commencement of hostilities at Lexington and Concord takes the form of merely reporting the encounter followed by numerous reports of eye-witnesses. Not until the edition of May 16, 1775 does an overt cognition of the significance of the event appear.

That many in the thirteen colonies turned their eyes toward Canada with the hope that she too would join in the battle against Britain is no secret. With great enthusiasm Miller's efforts support this union as exemplified in the call to Canadians to disperse with the slavery Great Britain has impelled upon her and to join in this effort to win anew our God-given rights.

Coverage of the war itself finds, as recognized in other German-American newspapers of the day, extensive expression. The major propaganda campaign continues in the war years in order to tarnish the image of the British and to evoke a feeling of pride and patriotism among Germans in America. Inhuman conditions in British prison camps, disgust on the part of British soldiers fighting in the colonies, their hope for termination of hostilities, a threatening conflagration between Great Britain and France, etc. form aspects of this undertaking. Much has been made of Miller's announcement of the Declaration of Independence; in fact, since his paper appeared on July 5, he became the first to print the announcement. That such weighty news appears on page two and is acknowledged in merely one curt sentence seems indeed curious. However, the edition of July 9 compensates for this by printing the entire Declaration of Independence translated into German, the first translation the Declaration experienced. Miller's jubilation expresses itself in a stylistic medium never before undertaken in his *Staatsbote* and one not continued

or typical of newspapers of the day, namely to sensationalize the event through headlines; he even employs several different sizes of type in this innovation.

Among the efforts to solidify German support for the new nation the poem *Ihr Americaner*, of March 19, 1776 should be mentioned. As a work of art it offers little but as a function of propaganda it seems effective. It reminds all of the reign of tyranny perpetrated by Great Britain upon the colonies and of the unresponsiveness of Parliament to all pleas from the colonists. Each line begins with the word "remember", for example:

Gedenkt an die Zoll Acte

Gedenkt an das blutbad zu Boston durch
 Britische soldaten angerichtet etc.

The same issue carries a letter composed by a German in Germany directed to Germans in America, especially in Pennsylvania. He reminds them why they left Germany, namely to escape bondage and to live in freedom; consequently, America is praised by contrasting her life style to social conditions in Central Europe. German-Americans must indeed all value highly their new life of freedom and pour forth all energy to defend it.

During the British occupation of Philadelphia, Miller had to flee the city and suspend publication. Upon his return he commenced work on the *Staatsbote* but on May 26, 1779 this influential paper, a clarion of American patriotism during the Revolution, ceased publication.

The Pennsylvania German-American newspress during the Revolution was a staunch defender of the American point of view. (Among the seven different newspapers published during those years only one was Tory and existed merely as long as the British troops occupied Philadelphia. It very probably was read mostly by the German mercenaries in British service). German-American support for the Revolution was

extensive and these newspapers continued to consolidate German-American sentiment behind the effort. They served as the major avenue not only of news but more importantly of propaganda for a large segment of the colony's population. Had they not been so vociferous we can only speculate whether the role German-Americans played might have been significantly different. Although the niveau of their newspapers varies considerably, they felt they had a mission to fulfill and never lost sight of it as they strove to champion the American cause.

NOTES

1. See Julius F. Sachse, "The First German Newspaper Published in America," **The Pennsylvania-German Society Proceedings and Addresses** (Lancaster, Penna. 1900), Vol. X, p. 41.

2. a. Germantown, **Germantowner Zeitung** 1762-1777, bi-weekly and weekly (a continuation of Christoph Saur's **Pennsylvanische Berichte**; also called **Die Germantowner Zeitung, Germantowner Wochen-Blatt**; after the battle of Germantown the Saurs moved to Philadelphia and there continued the paper as **Der Pennsylvanische Staats Courier**).

b. Philadelphia, **Der Pennsylvanische Staats-Courier, oder Einlaufende Wöchentliche Nachrichten**, 1777-1778, published weekly by Christoph Saur jun. and Peter Saur.

c. Lancaster, **Das Pennsylvanische Zeitungs-Blatt**, 1778, weekly, edited and published by Frantz Bailey.

d. Philadelphia, **Die Pennsylvanische Gazette, oder der Allgemeine Americanische Zeitungs-Schreiber**, 1779-? (evidence indicates that only several editions appeared), weekly, published by John Dunlap.

e. Philadelphia, **Philadelphisches Staatsregister**, 1779-1781, weekly, edited and published by Melchior Steiner and Carl Cist. With the dissolution of this firm it was succeeded by the **Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz**.

f. Philadelphia, **Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz**, 1781-1790 at which time its name was altered. Publication was continued for twenty-two years as a weekly by Melchior Steiner.

g. Philadelphia, **Der Wöchentliche Pennsylvanische Staatsbote**, title varies, 1762-1779, weekly, at times semi-weekly, published by Henry Miller. Publication was suspended during the British occupation of Philadelphia (Sept. 17, 1777-August 5, 1778). Its circulation has been estimated at 6500 with readers not only in Pennsylvania but throughout the colonies.

3. John Joseph Stoudt, "The German Press in Pennsylvania and the American Revolution," **The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography** (Philadelphia, 1935), Vol. LIX, 74-90.

4. See Moses Coit Tyler, "The Party of the Loyalists in the American Revolution," **The American Historical Review** (New York, 1896), Vol. I, 24-45.

5. Cf. Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, **German-American Newspapers and Periodicals** (Heidelberg, Germany, 1961), p. 523. The claim is here made that Saur remained loyal to England during the Revolution.

6. See Oswald Seidensticker, **The German Press in America** (Philadelphia, 1893), p. 99.

7. See Oswald Seidensticker, **Bilder aus der Deutsch-pennsylvanischen Geschichte** (New York, 1885), p. 113ff and especially 158.

8. James Owen Knauss, Jr., **Social Conditions among the Pennsylvania Germans in the Eighteenth Century as Revealed in the German Newspaper Published in America** (Lancaster, 1922), p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*

10. This letter from a European to his American friend appears in the edition of May 24, 1780.

11. The superior niveau of this paper resulted from the excellent editorship of two Lutheran pastors, Kunze and Helmuth; in fact, even English language newspapers printed translations from it. See Knauss, *loc. cit.* p. 18.

12. See, for example, H. M. M. Richards, "The Pennsylvania-German in the Revolutionary War 1775-1783," **The Pennsylvania-German Society Proceedings and Addresses** (Lancaster, 1908), pp. 1-542; F. J. F. Schantz, "The Domestic Life and Characteristics of the Pennsylvania-German Pioneer," **The Pennsylvania-German Society Proceedings and Addresses** (Lancaster, 1900), pp. 5-97; J. G. Rosengarten, **The German Soldier in the Wars of the United States** (Philadelphia, 1890); A. B. Faust, **The German Element in the United States** (New York, 1927); Ralph Wood et. al, **The Pennsylvania Germans** (Princeton, N. J., 1942).

13. See J. J. Stoudt, *loc. cit.*, pp. 80-87; A. B. Faust, *loc. cit.*, p. 368.

14. Such a tone is particularly rabid in the edition of January 4, 1774.

15. Cf. Moses Coit Tyler, *loc. cit.* Tyler shows how the colonists really did have representation in Parliament because of the manner in which the British parliamentary system functioned.

16. April 30, 1771. The letter is quoted, of course, in German. Cf. the open letter directed to the King which defends the American view of liberty and castigates George III (June 4, 1774).