

The 300th Anniversary of the Reformation (1817) and its Implications for German Immigration to America

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1. Introduction

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which began with Martin Luther's historic posting of his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. Reformation commemorations are planned worldwide, especially in Germany. By 2015, when I was last there, Wittenberg, which is officially known as *Lutherstadt Wittenberg*, was already filled with banners announcing the anniversary.

The first major commemorations of the Reformation in Germany took place in 1817. The centennial and bicentennial were not good times for commemorations. In 1617, Germany stood on the brink of the disastrous Thirty Years' War, and in 1717, it had just come out of the War of the Spanish Succession, which devastated the Palatinate.

Even in 1817, Germany had again come out of a period of many years of war waged by Napoleonic France. Fortunately, it was also a time of peace. There were, of course, many commemorations of the Reformation, but there were two that directly influenced German immigration to America. These were Prussian Church Union and the Wartburg-Fest.

To explore their impact on German immigration, the following questions should be addressed: First, what was the Prussian Church Union, and what impact did it have on German immigration? Second, what was the Wartburg-Fest, and what impact did it have on German immigration? Finally, what influence did these events have on the growth and development of the German element in America?

2. The Prussian Church Union

What was the Prussian Church Union? With the 300th anniversary of the Reformation on the horizon, Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia (1770-1840), sought to unite the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches.

So he issued a decree on 27 September 1817 proclaiming the "Foundation of the Prussian State Church," which would consist of a merger of the Lutheran and Reformed churches. The new church was called the Evangelical Church, its new name even excluding reference to the churches that had been merged by a decree of the Prussian state.

The merger mandated that creeds, liturgies, catechism, and hymnbooks be revised and be brought into harmony, and reflect the church union. Many protested these changes, which were described as unionistic, un-Lutheran, and not in accord with the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church.

Opposition at the grass-roots level caused Friedrich Wilhelm III to authorize enforcement of the union by the state. Although promulgated in Prussia, church unions spread to other German states as well, so this was not a development confined solely to the Hohenzollern state, but one that had a direct impact on other Protestant principalities as well.



Friedrich Wilhelm III
King of Prussia
Courtesy Wikipedia

Opponents proposed a separate Lutheran church. However, petitions in Prussia for an independent Lutheran church were denied, causing resistance to grow and develop. Opponents of the church union were called *Alt-Lutheraner* (Old Lutherans,) as they held to the Lutheran confessional writings, rejecting unionistic statements and creeds. Churches were state institutions, but the *Alt-Lutheraner* objected to the state becoming directly involved in the internal affairs of the church. However, resistance to the Prussian Union was now an offense that could be prosecuted by the state.

By 1835 pastors refusing to go along with the union became subject to imprisonment. At the same time, favorable books were appearing about America, such as *Bericht über eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten Nordamerika's* ("Report of a journey to the western states of North America"), by Gottfried



Dr. C.F.W. Walther
Courtesy Wikipedia

Duden (1789-1856). It described the New World in glowing terms. Societies were also being formed, such as the *Giessener Auswanderer-Gesellschaft* (Giessen Emigrants Society), to organize German immigration to America. Not surprisingly the idea emerged that the best course of action would be immigration.

Alt-Lutheraner groups began leaving Germany in 1839, causing friends and families to follow in their tracks. The initial waves settled in New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, and elsewhere, as well as in Canada and Australia. This immigration led to the formation of new German Lutheran synods in the U.S.: Buffalo in 1845, Missouri in 1847, Wisconsin in 1850, and Iowa in 1854. The foremost leader of these new synods was Dr. Carl F.W. Walther (1811-87), the first president of the Missouri Synod, and long-time editor of its influential German Lutheran journal *Der Lutheraner*.

The "Regulations for Emigrants," which was drawn up by Saxon *Alt-Lutheraner*, who in America formed the Missouri Synod, provides insight into how they viewed their situation:

*After calm and deliberate consideration
the emigrants can see no possibility
of maintaining their faith pure and*

unadulterated in their present home and of preserving it for future descendants. Hence they are constrained in their consciences to emigrate and to seek a country in which the Lutheran faith is not placed in jeopardy, where they can serve God according to His revealed order of grace, and where they may enjoy, without interference, the means of grace in their integrity and purity and preserve the means of grace pure and unadulterated for their descendants. These means of grace include: the office of the ministry, with full and free exercise of its duties, pure forms of worship, unadulterated preaching of the divine Word, the sacraments in the original form, and the cure of souls unhampered in its ministrations. A country of this character is the United States of America, where complete religious and civic liberty is maintained in a measure unknown elsewhere and where such liberty is guarded against foreign interference. We have chose the States as the goal of the emigration and hence of our new home.

3. The Wartburg-Fest

Soon after the promulgation of the Prussian Church Union, another event occurred relating to the Reformation Tricentennial, which also contributed to the German immigration to America. This was the Wartburg-Fest, which took place on 18 October 1817 at the castle where Luther translated the New Testament into German. However, rather than focusing on the Reformation anniversary, it was in actuality a protest demonstration against the political status quo.

German student unions known as *Burschenschaften* had called for a national convention to take place at the Wartburg. This would coincide not only with the month marking the Reformation's 300th anniversary, but also the fourth anniversary of the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, a battle which effectively removed French troops from German soil for the first time in years.

A brief period of national joy had followed the defeat of Napoleon, but Congress of Vienna in 1815 did not result in greater liberties and unity among the German states, but rather the restoration

of the old order. A period of deep disappointment and disillusionment set in for those who had enthusiastically supported and fought in the War of Liberation against Napoleon.

At the Wartburg-Fest students linked Luther, a spiritual leader, with Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher (1742-1819), the military leader of the Prussian Army that defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig, and later at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. They held a parade and in honor of Luther burned the papal bull; they also burned a list of the names of authors considered reactionary.

Such actions shocked the Austrian Foreign Minister Prince Klemens von Metternich (1773-1859), who viewed the fest as having revolutionary implications. He had been the chief architect of the restoration of the old order after the downfall of Napoleon in 1815.

By 1818, students formed the General German Student Union, with goals that were explicitly political.

Many gathered around Karl (Charles) Follen (1796-1840), a Privatdozent, or adjunct professor, at the



Karl (Charles) Follen
Courtesy Wikipedia

University of Jena. He was a flamboyant and charismatic leader who attracted a wide following of students imbued with the ideals of liberty, freedom, and unity for the German homeland.

One of his poems entitled “Das grosse Lied,” or “The Great Song,” was published anonymously. It was set to

music, became quite popular, and was often sung by students. Its most controversial stanza contained the following lines, which can be taken as an index of the depth of discontent at that time:

Allen ruft Teutschland's Noth
Allen des Herren Gebot:
Schlagt eure Plager todt,
Rettet das Land!

This translates as:

Germany's need cries to all,
to all the Lord's commandment:
Strike your tormentors dead,
Save the country!

There is no question as to what this meant: this was a call for, and rationalization of tyrannicide, i.e. the assassination of tyrants. The authorities quite understandably regarded the poem as having been penned by a dangerous revolutionary. Words, of course, have consequences.

Unfortunately, a deranged student, Karl Sand (1795-1820), followed up on the poem by assassinating an author, August von Kotzebue (1761-1819) who was regarded as reactionary. This insane act provided Metternich with the pretext to clamp down hard on all persons and organizations considered subversive. In concert with the King of Prussia, Metternich planned a set of special decrees, the Carlsbad Decrees, which were railroaded through the German parliament, the Bundestag, on 20 September 1819.



Prince Klemens von Metternich
Courtesy Wikipedia



This satirical lithograph was directed against the Carlsbad Decrees, with a sign on the wall asking “How long will thinking remain permitted to us?”

Courtesy Wikipedia

The Decrees established rigid control and censorship of the press and strict supervision of educational institutions. . The *Burschenschaften* were banned, as were Turner societies, whose members had fought in the War of Liberation. And founding father of Turnerism, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), was placed under arrest.

Follen was arrested on two occasions as the suspected author of the poem. However, the

authorities failed to make the connection between him and the anonymously published inflammatory poem. So, he was acquitted, but banned from teaching in Jena. Eventually, he made his way to Switzerland, but had to flee after Prussia demanded his extradition, citing him as a dangerous revolutionary. He then fled to America in 1824.

A handful of others immigrated, such as Karl Beck (1798-1866), who became a professor of Classics at Harvard. Follen also obtained a position at Harvard, becoming the first professor of German in America. Both he and Beck helped introduce Turner-style gymnastics to their new homeland. Later on, Follen played an active role in the abolitionist movement. After his death, his wife published his biography, including his controversial poem, which proved that he actually was its author.

Just as the Reformation had political dimensions to it, so too did the Wartburg-Fest. The event became the vehicle through which discontent with the political status quo could be expressed, and visions of liberty and German unity could be proclaimed.

4. Finally, what influence did these two immigrations emanating from the Reformation anniversary of 1817 have upon the growth and development of the German element in America?

The Prussian Church Union caused dissension and division in Germany, sparking a wave of immigration of the Old Lutherans to America. They significantly added to the size of the German element in the U.S. but they formed a new and distinct dimension of German Lutheranism in America. Geographically, the newcomers settled further to the west of the older colonial settlements in the east.

They viewed the General Synod, the older and the major Lutheran church body, as linguistically Americanized. Although many of its congregations and members were bilingual, the language shift had already been underway in terms of the use of English at its church conventions and in its publications.

The newcomers also felt that the General Synod displayed unionistic tendencies, which were not in accord with the Lutheran confessional writings. And liturgically, they felt it had succumbed to other influences such as Puritanism and the revivalist tendencies of the Great Awakening. This led to church services, which in their view were strikingly different

than what they were accustomed to in Germany.

When we look at the Lutheran church bodies in America today, we can see that they reflect this historical background. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America reminds us theologically and liturgically of the mindset of those who founded and belonged to the General Synod. On the other hand, the Missouri and Wisconsin Synod can be seen as directly descended from the Old Lutheran immigration of the 19th century.

Like the Prussian Church Union, the Wartburg-Fest also caused immigration to America, which was politically, rather than religiously motivated. It was much smaller numerically, but was a harbinger of politically motivated immigrations to come in the following decades as a result of the revolution of 1832 and 1848.

Theologically, immigrants like Follen were liberal-minded, and they often settled in New England, where they felt at home with the literary and philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism. This is not surprising as this movement was greatly influenced by German philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). It is also not surprising that Follen, became a Unitarian minister in Boston, and later an active proponent of the early abolition movement.

Taking a step back to look at these two strands of German immigration to America, one religiously motivated and the other secularly motivated, we can see their influence on the growth and development of the German element. In the course of the 19th century, two major segments developed in German-American communities, which revolved around religious or secular institutions. The former came to be known as *Kirchendeutsche*, or church Germans, and the latter as *Vereinsdeutsche*, or club Germans.

So in conclusion, we can say that two events relating to the Reformation anniversary of 1817 greatly contributed to the German immigration to America in the 19th century, as well as to the subsequent growth and development of what we know as the German element: the Prussian Church Union and the Wartburg-Fest.

Recommended Reading

There are many sources dealing with the topics covered in this essay, but the following are especially informative for those interested in further reading.

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