The German-Americans: An Ethnic Experience

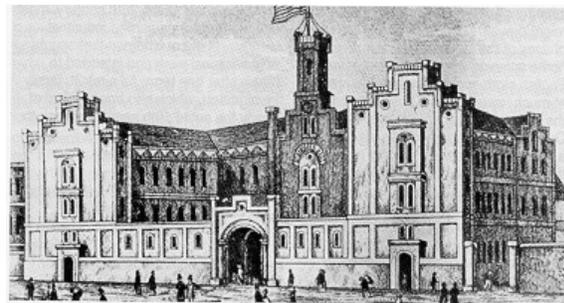Willi Paul Adams, Lavern J. Rippley, Eberhard Reichmann

2 Why Germans Left Home

By far the largest number of German immigrants went to America in search of an improved standard of living. Political and religious freedom probably motivated fewer emigrants than did the threat of Prussian military service. Whether "push factors," fanned by disgruntlement with living conditions in Germany, or whether "pull factors" -- faith in more favorable opportunities in the United States -- exercised a greater influence on the emigrant's decision to leave, is impossible to ascertain. Table 1 shows widely varying numbers of immigrants by year. This can best be explained in terms of the interaction between push and pull factors in the emigrant's homeland and in the target country. At any rate, we do know that ever since the 18th century, detailed information about American business cycles, wages and food prices was widely publicized in Germany. Immigrant letters back home were read aloud in village taverns and no doubt served to correct some of the exaggerated claims made in the immigrant recruitment literature distributed by land companies and railroads.

In a broader sense, economic and political motivation cannot be separated. As a matter of fact, when the decision to emigrate was impelled by the desire to become a farmer with one's own land or a craftsman with one's own business, this also implied a rejection of the rigidity of the social class structure in the authoritarian German states. Thus, from his point of view, an official in the state of Nassau

The Emigrants' Building in Bremerhaven, built in 1849.

in 1846 was correct in complaining that "emigrants were infected with the disease of an erroneous concept of freedom and a monstrous idea about statehood," and that emigration fever was making the "lower class" rebellious. A clear renunciation of the ruling political class can be detected, for example, in the demands made by 160 tenant farmers [*Heuerlinge*] from the village of Engter near Osnabrück, a region of massive emigration. In a plea presented to the Duke of Braunschweig in the revolutionary year of 1848, they pressed for eight considerations:

1. Complete relief from the head tax (*Personensteuer*)
2. Ending the practice of opting out of military service via paid substitutes
3. Free access to sessions of the state assembly (*Landtag*) and village councils
4. Freedom from the school tax and other ecclesiastical taxes, and improvement of the common schools
5. Relief from all uncompensated road work
6. Assignment of sufficient acreage in subdivided and undivided common lands for free use
7. Regulation of rental conditions; relief from uncompensated services; specifying length and cost of leases for dwellings and acreage
8. Establishing public institutions in all counties for the care of poor, old, and invalid farm tenants and their families.

Source: *Osnabrücker Tageblatt*, April 4, 1848. See also Kamphoefner, *The Westphalians* (1987), 62.

Table 3. German Immigration since 1820

Decade	Total Immigration	German	% of Total
1820-29	128,502	5,753	4.5
1830-39	538,381	124,726	23.2
1840-49	1,427,337	385,434	27.0
1850-59	2,814,554	976,072	34.7
1860-69	2,081,261	723,734	34.8
1870-79	2,742,137	751,769	27.4
1880-89	5,248,568	1,445,181	27.5
1890-99	3,694,294	579,072	15.7
1900-09	8,202,388	328,722	4.0
1910-19	6,347,380	174,227	2.7
1920-29	4,295,510	386,634	9.0
1930-39	699,375	119,107	17.0
1940-49	856,608	117,506	14.0
1950-59	2,499,268	576,905	23.1
1960-69	3,213,749	209,616	6.5
1971-80	4,493,000	66,000	1.5
1981-88	4,711,000	55,800	1.2
Totals	49,753,412	7,028,258	14.1

Religiously-motivated emigrant groups typically left the Old World in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the intolerant environment of Europe, they had not been permitted to shape their own community life. Not just pietistic sects, but also members of recognized state churches, went through the trouble of emigration. In 1839, for example, over 1,000 Old Lutherans emigrated to evade the forced unification of the Lutheran and Reformed churches

Dispatch hall for Jewish emigrants at the emigration facilities of the Hamburg-America Line in Hamburg-Veddel. Foto by Hamann, 1909.

in Prussia. They went primarily to Buffalo, Milwaukee and St. Louis. Pietistic and Anabaptist groups founded "communistic" or communal societies, in Pennsylvania, among other places, both at Harmony in 1804 and at Economy in 1825, in Indiana in 1814 at New Harmony, at Zoar, Ohio in 1817, and at Amana, Iowa in 1843. The number of Catholic emigrants, particularly of Catholic priests and members of religious orders, increased dramatically following Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (1871 - 1887), the power struggle between the Prussian state and the Catholic church. Jews fled social discrimination especially in southern and later in eastern Germany.
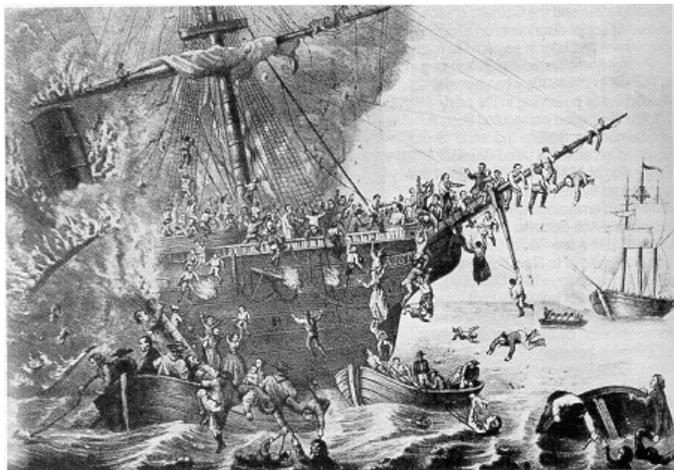
Politically-motivated emigration began in earnest in the 1830s when the reactionary forces governing in the post-Napoleonic period persecuted liberals and democrats. Several thousand revolutionaries left after the failed German Revolution of 1848, most of whom at first considered themselves asylum seekers rather than emigrants. Likewise, Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law (1878-90) caused quite a few Social Democratic activists to move to New York and Chicago to continue their class struggle. The next wave of politically-motivated emigrants consisted of groups marked for annihilation by the National Socialist dictatorship between 1933-45, among them Social Democrats and other opponents of the regime, and above all Jewish Germans and other Europeans threatened with mass murder and genocide. In the postwar era after 1945, when Germany lay in ruins, the traditional principal factor inducing emigration, namely economics, was back at work.

Archangel Raphael was the patron saint of emigrants, both for Catholics and Lutherans. From W. Löhe's Reisende [Raphael, Prayer Booklet for Travelers].

Economic conditions as well as political relationships differed greatly in the German regions during the 18th and 19th centuries. In southwestern Germany the inheritance laws played a major role, especially the division of the parental possessions among all children in equal shares, which resulted in the continued dismemberment of family farms. This problem was alleviated whenever factories were constructed in the neighborhood, with the result that additional workers were needed. Then emigration usually took a downturn. Such was the case for instance in the Ruhr district, in Saxony, and in Silesia as well as in greater Berlin.

On the other hand, in regions such as northwestern Germany, where the firstborn enjoyed priority when it came to an inheritance, a high rate of emigration still might prevail. This happened in the early phases of the industrial revolution, when home spinning wheels fell idle because English cloth goods came on the market at much lower prices. Those occupied in the cottage industry of Westphalia and Osnabrück were particularly affected. As a result, many peasants of this region left their homeland during the 1830s and 40s.

In addition, wheat crop failures, poor wine harvests and a potato blight made for more misery. Heavy emigration from the regions east of the Elbe River occurred in the last third of the 19th century. More and more, grain farms there lost out to the fertile soils of the American Midwest and its highly competitive products -- raised, ironically, on fields then being cultivated by immigrant farmers from northern Europe who were now forcing more German farm folk off their land and into emigration. At the onset of the 20th century, most emigrants were unmarried industrial workers, many of whom at first sought only seasonal work and intended to return after one term. As a result, family immigration, which had been typical of nearly the entire 19th century, shrank to about one third of the total.

On Sept. 13, 1858, fire broke out on the "Austria" on her way from Hamburg to New York. Only 89 of 542 souls could be saved.