

THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE GERMAN ELEMENT IN COLONIAL AMERICA

BY ANDREAS DORPALEN

New York City

I

GERMANS have been among the first white men to set foot on this continent. A German, Tyrker, was a member of Leif Ericson's expedition to Vineland. When, centuries later, after Columbus' revolutionizing discovery, Europe began to take possession of America, Germans were again among those first pioneers who blazed a trail through the unknown wilderness of the new country.

But those who came, did so in the wake of the English, French, and Dutch. They did not come as German nationals to plant the flag of their mother country on the newly conquered soil. They came as men without country, without the protection of a powerful navy to bridge the gulf between the new home and the old one. They settled along the seacoast from Florida to New Netherland, affluents to the mighty stream which gradually swept across this vast continent from one end to the other. Sucked up by it, they left hardly any records.

Among the few of these first pioneers who rose to social and political influence, was Peter Minuit, a native of Wesel on the Rhine. He arrived in New Amsterdam in 1626, as a director of the colony of New Netherland. After having bought the Island of Manhattan from the Indians, he began to fortify its southernmost tip by erecting a small blockhouse encircled by palisades and backed by earthworks. With the erection of Fort Amsterdam, soon a prosperous trading post, he sowed the seed which, in years to come, grew into the city of New York. But he owes his place in the textbooks of history less to the fact that he laid the foundation of the greatest metropolis of the world than to his purchase

of Manhattan, today worth millions of dollars, for a scant twenty-four dollars in gold.

Jacob Leisler, born in Frankfort-on-the-Main, who became governor of New York sixty years later (1689), left a deeper impress on the political development of the city. A very pronounced antagonism had developed in New York between the leading families and the masses. Whereas all other colonies had—at least nominally—representative Assemblies, even if they were mostly controlled by royal or proprietary appointees, New York did not even have this semblance of a popular government. With the leading families monopolizing all political power, lack of a popular representative government and arbitrary taxation had long bred increasing discontent among the masses.

This antagonism was not an isolated phenomenon. It was the expression of social restlessness and dissatisfaction with the existing order which had seized the entire English world and had spread from the mother country to the American colonies. The common man refused to follow blindly the lead of the aristocracy. He claimed his own share in political life. What led to open revolt in Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Massachusetts, could not be suppressed in New York, where popular rights were least recognized.

Leisler, one of the wealthiest citizens himself, though held in little esteem by the ruling families, had always sided with the people and thus gained their confidence. When the smouldering conflict broke into open revolt in 1689, he was the obvious leader of a new popular government. However, the ill-considered movement, which could maintain itself only by strict dictatorial rule, was soon suppressed by armed force. Leisler, a victim of misunderstandings and intrigues, as well as of his own stubborn fanaticism and political inexperience, was convicted of high treason and hanged. A few years later, however, at the instigation of some of his friends, Parliament reversed the attainder against him, acknowledging the sincerity of his intentions.

With epithets about him ranging from "inspired leader" to "upstart demagogue," Leisler has always been a disputed figure. However this may be, his name will always be identified with the first popular movement in New York. Even if it was doomed to failure, it marked the beginning of that fight which gradually

brought about the transition from autocratic government to the constitutional system of later days. The history of New York during the next century resounds of this struggle between aristocrats and Leislerians. And the latter's battle cries echoed forth in the utterances of the more radical of Jefferson's leaders, in the days of the French revolution.

Moreover, Leisler's government was distinguished by his repeated efforts at coöperation with the different colonies. In 1690, he called a convention of the colonial governors to discuss the threat of a French attack and to decide upon common defense measures, and he frequently consulted them on matters of administration. Thus the ground was laid for closer relations between the different colonies, leading finally to joint action in the nation-wide movement for independence.

II

That the leader of this first popular rising in New York was of German descent, was entirely accidental. The somewhat more democratic tradition of the Free City of Frankfort-on-the-Main may have bred in Leisler a feeling of greater independence towards the power of the existing government than it would have been the case with someone brought up under the rigid discipline of an autocratic monarchy. But he, as well as Peter Minuit, had come to these shores after many adventurous experiences, and had long lost all contact with his mother country.

When, seventy years later, the same alignment of forces in Pennsylvania led to a similar movement against the autocratic attitude of the party in power, the German element as such played a more significant part.

Ever since William Penn had traveled through Germany in the attempt to find settlers for his newly acquired land grant on the American continent, an unceasing flow of Germans had followed his appeal. Hundreds and thousands came to this new Eden which offered, with freedom of religion, security from devastating wars and oppressive governments, and whose low land prices made the founding of a new home possible. The first permanent settlement at Germantown in 1683 was soon followed by countless others. The land policy of the Penn family was so much more liberal than that of other colonies, notably New York's,

which, at one time, had seen a fairly extensive German immigration, and their religious tolerance made Pennsylvania so attractive to all persecuted sects that the colony was the center of the German immigration throughout the colonial period. New England, bound by religious prejudices, did not encourage immigration at all. New York had treated its first German settlers very ungenerously, and was, therefore, shunned by new immigrants. Those who had to take the boat to New York, hastened immediately on to Pennsylvania, "right before the eyes of all the inhabitants of New York."¹ Thus, at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, the Germans constituted one third of the population of Pennsylvania, numbering over one hundred thousand.

Despite their number the German settlers exercised a much less decisive influence on the public life of the colony, as might be expected. It was not only that they were, in contrast to the English part of the population, politically completely inexperienced and suspicious of any governmental activity which their mind would always associate with the bitter experiences of their cheerless past. But fleeing the unforgettable horrors of the Thirty Years' War and the ruthless ravages of the generals of Louis XIV, the brutal persecutions by their own princes and the hopelessness of a social system which offered no chance of political or economic advancement, they had no other desire but to live quietly and to devote themselves fully to the building up of a new and better life. Moreover, as the land along the seacoast was already occupied, they had to acquire their (less expensive) properties in the unsettled wilderness of the interior. Thus theirs was a life of unrelenting toil, leaving hardly any time even for a few recreations.

Besides, as freedom of religion had expressly been granted to them, they made full use of this cherished right. And if religious reasons were not the only, or decisive, motivation of their emigration, religious influences were yet strong enough to shape the individual's life and views. They decided their attitude towards public affairs. The majority of the German settlers were, at the beginning at least, Mennonites, Dunkers, and Moravians, pietist sects, whose followers advocated non-resistance and refused to

¹ Peter Kalm, *Travels in North America* (A. B. Benson, ed., New York, 1937), p. 143.

take oaths. They had, therefore, to decline the acceptance of public offices, local as well as provincial. Pastorius, leader of the Germantown settlement, had so much difficulty to fill its few administrative posts that Germantown lost its charter as a borough town in 1704.²

In addition to economic and religious reasons, poor command of the English language, difficulties to acquire citizenship (and with it political rights) and remoteness of the capital made German participation in the political life of the colony practically impossible. Besides, educational facilities were altogether insufficient owing to the lack of adequate means and to the opposition of Mennonites and Dunkers to any but the simplest education. Higher education, according to them, made men supercilious and took up time which should rather be devoted to worship and prayer. An attempt on the part of the English to organize charity schools for the German population in which both English and German were to be taught free of charge, was likewise defeated. However, in this case fears lest English would soon supersede German in these schools, played an important rôle. As the plan was sponsored by men who were known to be in close contact with anti-German movements, these anxieties were not without foundation.

Absorbed by their struggle against the hardships of the frontier wilderness, without able, experienced leaders, the German settlers were well satisfied to entrust the administration of the colony to the numerically inferior Quakers. They could do so all the more easily as the latter advocated religious principles of peace and tolerance very much like their own. Anxious to avoid the burdensome tasks which participation in government implied, they went even so far as to elect Englishmen to represent them in the General Assembly. "Your choice of an Assembly will always be a great Majority of English," exclaimed one of their spokesmen, Conrad Weiser, on the eve of an election, "and as no Nation in the World is more zealous for the Protection of their Liberties, in whom as Englishmen we may therefore in this Respect safely confide."³ The Quakers, in turn, who could thus keep their control

² O. Kuhns, *The German and Swiss Settlements of Colonial Pennsylvania* (New York, 1901), p. 196.

³ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXIII (1899), 521.

over the Assembly despite their much smaller number, were willing enough to promise them exemption from military service, the only demand the Germans made.⁴ On this point, however, they were insistent. "One Jonas Seely, a candidate for the office of sheriff," relates Gordon in his *History of Pennsylvania*, "at the opening of the poll in Reading, united all voices in his favor; but it being reported that he was of the governor's party, . . . and would compel all persons to assume the musket, the Germans, to a man, left him, and he was not returned."⁵ Many who were not opposed to military service for religious reasons, objected to it, because it reminded them of former oppression.

This failure to take an active part in the political life of the colony was repeatedly used as a pretext by anti-German elements in their efforts to prejudice governor and Assembly against them. The French, it is true, mistaking their disinterestedness in public affairs for a sign of disloyalty, tried several times to bring them over to their side. But while the German allegiance to the new home was not strong enough as to induce them to take an active part in the administration of its affairs, the French were equally unsuccessful in their attempts to win them as allies against the English. The German settlers were not willing to exchange Pennsylvania's freedom for a "Romish Slavery upheld by a French king."⁶

For a long time everything went well. It is true, nativist movements found their expression in the Assembly's proposals for anti-German laws to curtail the political and civil rights of the Germans and to check the steady influx of immigrants. But all measures of this kind were vetoed by the governor, who, as representative of the proprietors, was interested in attracting as large a number of immigrants to the colony as possible. However, the Quakers found other less conspicuous ways of maintaining their political control. They failed to create new counties in the western

⁴ W. Smith, *A Brief State of the Province of Pennsylvania* (London, 1755), *Sabin's Reprints*, No. 4 (New York, 1865), pp. 28-29; S. Wharton MS. (1755), in J. F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, rev. by W. P. Hazard, (Philadelphia, 1884), II, 256. At the same time, the Quakers were able to secure the support of the most influential German newspaper, *Der Hoch-Deusch Pennsylvanische Geschichtsschreiber*, whose editor, Christoph Sauer, was a devout Dunker and as such pledged to non-resistance.

⁵ T. F. Gordon, *History of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1829), p. 316.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, II, 202.

(predominantly German and Scotch-Irish) parts of the colony and thus prevented these parts from being adequately represented in the Assembly. The wealthier and more capable Germans, moreover, who alone could have offered any effective opposition, were concentrated in the East. Their interests coincided with those of the Quakers, and these were shrewd enough to welcome them socially as well as politically into their ranks. Thus they felt firmly enough entrenched in their position to pursue a policy which often favored their own interests to the detriment of the interior.

But gradually, first hardly noticeably, the attitude of the West towards the East changed. The Quakers realized the inability of the German settlers to launch a political movement of their own without capable leaders. They also knew all potential German leaders to be their allies. But they failed to take into account new influences which began to mould the frontiersman's mind.

Far from all contacts with civilization, he had for a long time found his only spiritual and emotional recreation in religious exercises.⁷ Thus doubly receptive to the teachings of Edwards and Whitefield which then swept the country, he was deeply impressed by a message which insisted on the value of the individual and the necessity of his direct communion with the Holy Spirit in contrast to the rigid formalism of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. A message, moreover, which challenged State and Church by questioning their ability to secure man's comfort and happiness clinched strikingly the hard lessons the wilderness of the frontier had taught him. And, although he did probably not realize this, it created at the same time a common spiritual link with the rest of the country which was then under the fascinating spell of the "Great Awakening."

The ground was thus prepared for a gradual turning away from the allegiance to the Quaker party when the trend of its policy made the neglect of his interests evident. The frontier settlements, heretofore self-sufficient, had begun to market their produce and thus were drawn into the current of provincial affairs and problems. Other influences made themselves felt. Owing to the failure of the Assembly in Philadelphia to provide adequate means

⁷ O. Kuhns, *The German and Swiss Settlements*, pp. 155-160.

of communication, the western parts of the colony took their produce to Baltimore, much more easily reached over direct roads. It brought them into close contact with the more democratic attitude of the Assembly at Annapolis where the rivalry between the masses and the aristocracy had been decided in favor of the former long ago. Its attention to popular demands and needs contrasted favorably with the neglectful attitude of Philadelphia. Gradually, indifference towards the proceedings of the Assembly changed into watchful suspicion. Trade jealousies between Lancaster and Philadelphia contributed to the growing antagonism against the East. And the politically much more astute Scotch-Irish, long opposed to the Quaker oligarchy, and insistent on their rights, did not tire to foment this antagonism, anxious to bring the powerful German vote over to their side. As the German immigrants, after 1725, had been recruited increasingly from the ranks of the more militant members of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, while the immigration of the non-resistant sects decreased, this agitation was not without effect.

The long kindled flame burst finally into open fire. After Braddock's defeat, in 1755, the whole frontier was exposed to Indian attacks. Several settlements were burnt down, their inhabitants brutally killed. As after such incidents the Quaker-dominated Assembly still failed to provide adequate defense measures, the frontier rebelled. And among the men who marched on Philadelphia to demand military protection against the Indian raids, were hundreds of Germans.⁸ From weary, docile, quiet refugees who had come here subdued by centuries of oppression and persecution, they had changed into independent self-reliant pioneers, hardened by the unceasing struggle with the wilderness. The demonstration was successful. Several divisions were equipped by the Assembly to resist further attacks.

From that time on, the German vote became more valuable than ever. Quakers and Scotch-Irish were equally anxious to win it over to their respective sides. But the Germans were not in a position to take advantage of their key position. Too long had they been under the influence of Mennonites and Dunkers to be

⁸ A. B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States* (New York, 1927), I, 271.

able to put capable leaders in the field who might make full use of the political situation.

Therefore, the gains after the initial victory over the Assembly were comparatively small. The Quakers had to make only minor concessions to the demands of the western parts of the province. The existing counties were each allowed an additional member in the Legislature in 1770. In each of the following three years, a new county, but with only a single vote, was created.⁹

But even if the West was not yet strong enough to achieve complete equality with the East, the trend of events pointed unmistakably to the direction of future developments.

III

In no other colony was the German element represented in nearly as great numbers during the pre-revolutionary period as in Pennsylvania. Whereas there it amounted to as much as one third of the population of that colony at the outbreak of the Revolution, in the thirteen colonies as a whole it represented not more than ten per cent.¹⁰ Consequently, if its political influence was small there, it was hardly noticeable at all in other parts of the country.

When the same controversy between the oligarchy of the sea-coast and the farmers of the interior led to a minor civil war in North Carolina in 1771, the German settlers kept aloof. In vain did the insurgent "Regulators" try to bring them over to their side. Mostly Moravians, they refused to fight and took much pride in the statement of Governor Tryon that "of all Denominations in this Province, the Moravians are the only ones who had shown themselves loyal subjects."¹¹

Moreover, in accordance with English law, most colonies would not admit naturalized citizens to any public office. When Jonathan Hager, one of the leading Germans in Maryland, was elected to the House of Delegates in 1771, a special law had to be passed by that body to permit him to take his seat.¹²

⁹ C. H. Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 51.

¹⁰ A. B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, I, 285.

¹¹ *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina* (A. L. Fries, ed., Raleigh, N. C., 1922-30), I, 460.

¹² B. Sollers, "Jonathan Hager," *Second Annual Report of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1887-88), p. 22.

There was only one question which seems to have received the attention of the German settler in every colony from New England to Georgia. This was the problem of slavery which he was compelled to face both for economic and religious reasons.

The first public denouncement of slavery was uttered on this continent in 1688, at Germantown, by a group of German Mennonites.¹³ Finding strong support in the ranks of the Quakers, the anti-slavery movement quickly gained momentum in Pennsylvania. Granted that it was caused by sincere religious scruples, the fact cannot be overlooked, however, that economic conditions facilitated the stand taken by Quakers and Mennonites. It was not strong enough, moreover, to prevent the use of slaves where it seemed economically desirable. The example of William Penn is known. And while the Mennonites could easily denounce slavery as un-Christian, their brother sect, the Salzburg Moravians in Georgia, needing slave labor for the cultivation of their cotton plantations, tobacco fields, and rice swamps, found consolation in the decision of one of their leaders: "If you take slaves in faith, and with the intent of conducting them to Christ, the action will not be sin, but it may prove a benediction."¹⁴ But there was some sincerity even in this opportunism. Thus a Negro who had been employed by Germans for a number of years, could successfully plead with them to buy him from his present owner by declaring his intention to embrace Christianity.¹⁵

Even the religious objections of the Pennsylvania Germans admitted exceptions to the rule when economic necessity demanded them. While Negro slavery seemed so reprehensible to them, they did not seem to have the same scruples against buying indentured white servants, so much more useful in fighting the wilderness than the black man. White servants were, moreover, a much more profitable investment than Negro slaves. They could be obtained for four or five years for the mere cost of their transportation from Europe. After the expiration of their term, the master was no longer responsible for them, whereas he had to take care of the Negro until his death, in case of sickness or extreme poverty even

¹³ J. F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, II, 512-14.

¹⁴ S. Urlsperger, *Amerikanisches Ackerwerk Gottes* (Augsburg, 1754-67), I, 4.

¹⁵ *Records of the Moravians*, I, 385.

if the Negro had been manumitted.¹⁶ And when no indentured servants or redemptioners¹⁷ were available, many of the Pennsylvania Germans did not hesitate to buy Negro slaves. Significantly enough, Christoph Sauer, who was fiercely opposed to slavery and published ever so often attacks on the slave trade in his journal, did have no objection against publishing at the same time advertisements about runaway slaves.¹⁸

How much more, in the end, economic considerations decided the stand of the German settlers towards the slave issue than religious scruples, is best revealed by the change of attitude those Pennsylvania farmers experienced who moved on to the South. Almost all of them were small farmers who owned little property and no slaves. Settling in the western and central parts of North Carolina, they took small holdings of land which they tilled with their own hands. But there, with increasing prosperity, they also gradually turned to slave labor. "As they progressed in wealth, they yielded to the influence of environment, and slaves at the time of the Revolution were being used in considerable number among them."¹⁹

The few laws of the colonial period sponsored by Germans concern mostly the protection of German immigrants. The conditions under which these were brought over from Europe are indescribable. Crowded into unsanitary vessels, without proper food and care, they arrived starved, diseased, unfit for any kind of labor. Many of them perished on the voyage. Leading Germans sought to introduce bills in the Assembly at Philadelphia, the main port of entry, in order to prevent the ruthless practices of greedy ship captains and their companies. These efforts culminated in the organization of the "Deutsche Gesellschaft" in Philadelphia, a society whose task it was to aid the immigrant by

¹⁶ R. R. Wright, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1911), pp. 18-19; E. R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Washington, 1911), p. 15.

¹⁷ There was practically no difference between them. See K. F. Geiser, "Redemptioners and Indentured Servants in the Colony and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," *Yale Review*, X (1901), Supplement to No. 2, p. 6.

¹⁸ J. O. Knauss, *Social Conditions among the Pennsylvania Germans in the Eighteenth Century, as Revealed in German Newspapers Published in America* (Lancaster, Pa., 1922), pp. 69-70.

¹⁹ J. S. Bassett, "Slavery and Servitude in the Colony of North Carolina," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Fourteenth Series (Baltimore, 1896), Nos. 4-5, p. 19.

material means and to protect him by sponsoring adequate legislation which resulted in bettering his lot considerably.

These attempts on the part of Germans to help the immigrant by limiting the number of passengers on one boat, by providing them with money, food, clothes, and proper medical care on their arrival, coincided often with the recurrent waves of nativist feelings aroused by the steadily increasing number of Germans.²⁰ When, therefore, the *Wöchentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote* boasted in 1766 that most of the immigrants were now assigned to other colonies, because the Pennsylvania laws were too strict,²¹ it almost seems as if the purpose of these endeavors were not entirely humanitarian. The fact that only strong, healthy servants were of any use, must not be overlooked, either.

Similar measures in Massachusetts had certainly been dictated by very strong personal motives. The sponsor of a law "regulating the importation of German and other Passengers," passed by the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1750, was Joseph Crellius, a German. He was engaged in immigrant traffic and hoped that the protection thus provided for prospective immigrants would increase the volume of his business.²² However, he was unsuccessful in this attempt, because the ship companies began to send their vessels to more hospitable ports with milder restrictions. It is possible that this experience influenced the sponsors of the immigration laws in Pennsylvania.

(To be concluded in the next issue.)

²⁰ *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, IV, 508.

²¹ J. O. Knauss, *Social Conditions Among the Pennsylvania Germans in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 64.

²² H. A. Rattermann, "Geschichte des Deutschen Elements in Maine," *Der Deutsche Pionier*, XIV (Cincinnati, 1882), 145.