THE GERMAN ELEMENT IN EARLY PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS, 1789-1800: A STUDY IN AMERICANIZATION

By Andreas Dorpalen

The number of German immigrants during the colonial period was exceeded only by that of English and Scotch-Irish. According to conservative estimates the German element in the colonies at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War amounted to as much as ten per cent of the entire population. Yet Germans were never conspicuous in the political life of their adopted land. Engrossed in their religious separatism, they kept to themselves and settled preferably in lonely frontier regions. Poor command of the English language contributed further to their aloofness. On some occasions, it is true, they joined in movements of their English-speaking neighbors to urge or to oppose certain government measures. But these were rare cases, with issues at stake with which they were vitally concerned and in which they could not possibly avoid taking a stand. Only toward the end of the colonial period did they begin to participate more actively in the political life of the colonies and of Pennsylvania in particular, where most of them had settled. By that time they had already become Americanized to such a degree that they found themselves in the midst of a process of complete absorption into the American nation. Their elected leaders considered themselves true Americans—and only as an American could one of them, Frederick August Muhlenberg, be elected in 1789 speaker of the first national House of Representatives.

This process continued after the close of the Revolutionary War. Immigration had practically stopped with the outbreak of hos-


tilities, and because of conditions in Europe it was resumed only on a small scale after peace had been restored. The American Revolution was followed by the much more violent French Revolution, which shook Europe's balance for twenty-five years, until Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena. The coalition and the Napoleonic wars killed countless thousands of possible emigrants. The wars that ravaged the continent continued on the seas, and the risks involved in ocean travel were a further deterrent to emigration to America. Commercial relations between the United States and the European nations broke down completely for long periods. False rumors concerning conditions in America could therefore be spread easily without being corrected by direct contact with Americans. Tales that chaos and lawlessness were reigning in the young republic, that an unceasing chain of upheavals was bringing the country to the brink of economic ruin and civil war, were thus readily believed. A traveler's report that the United States was nothing but a criminals' paradise served to confirm the generally accepted picture of conditions in America. Even more impressive was another observer's description of emigration as "the natural resource of the culprit, and of those who have made themselves the objects of contempt and neglect. . . . It is generally calculated, that not above one emigrant in five succeeds so as to settle a family." Finally, the alien and sedition acts, passed in 1798, necessarily discouraged European influx.

The German element in America, lacking the infiltration of new blood, was rapidly breaking down. So far it had concentrated for the most part in Pennsylvania, with smaller numbers moving on to Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. But when the victorious outcome of the Revolutionary War opened the West to unhindered settlement, many of the Pennsylvania Germans followed the

2 D. von Bülow, Der Freistaat von Nordamerika in seinem neuesten Zustand (Berlin, 1797), vol. ii, p. 89.
western trail, fighting their way to the valley of the Ohio river and helping to open Kentucky and Tennessee. Spreading thus over the country, the Germans became in many of their former strongholds an easily assimilated minority.

The disappearance of linguistic ties further accelerated the disintegration of the German element. As the Germans became more and more Americanized, their native tongue lost ground steadily. When the Pennsylvania assembly was considering whether or not to make German an official language of the state, Frederick August Muhlenberg, who himself spoke German with difficulty, cast his deciding vote as speaker in favor of English. Denial of official recognition deprived the language of the only way in which it might have been preserved in America. It is doubtful, however, that even the opposite decision could have halted for long its eclipse. After all, the supremacy of English was the outcome of a natural development. Business and social contacts, intermarriages, and the growing realization that success and prosperity depended on the knowledge of English all worked together to thin the ranks of those who sought to oppose the trend.

The discontinuance on the part of the religious sects in Germany of the practice of sending ministers to America led to an increasing estrangement of the American branches from the German mother churches. Halle, one of the main centers of Lutheran missionary activities in this country, provided no minister after 1786. Religious activities which often had kept together German communities ceased or were so much changed by American influences that they lost their specific German character. English-

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10 For an interesting description of the fight between the two parties as carried on in the German press of the period see J. O. Knauss, *Social Conditions among the Pennsylvania Germans*, pp. 112 ff.
speaking ministers replaced German ones. “God is my witness,” complained the Reverend Henry Muhlenberg in 1805, “I worked against the English as long as I could, but I cannot longer resist.” How hopeless resistance against the adoption of English had become was strikingly revealed by the admission of G. Helmbold, publisher of the Philadelphische Correspondenz, one of the leading German newspapers, that, unable to write his articles in German, he wrote them in English and then had them translated.

Hagerstown, Maryland, underwent a change typical of German settlements at that time. One of the oldest German towns in this country, it was still in 1794 inhabited chiefly by Germans. Among four local churches it boasted two of German denominations. Yet the minister of the German Lutheran Church as early as 1789 appears to have been a native American. Of the four local schools only one was German, and the local weekly newspaper, which had a circulation of about two hundred and fifty, was printed in English. In addition, fifty English papers were brought over from Baltimore every week. On the other hand, only fifty German newspapers, which came from Lancaster once a week, were read in Hagerstown altogether.

In 1805 the publisher of a German bible in Reading announced in an introductory note that because of the expected early disappearance of the German language in America the current edition would very probably be the last one to appear in German in the United States. As if to confirm this prediction German-Lutheran churches of New York City discontinued German sermons after 1807. English services superseded German ones in Philadelphia in 1806, in Albany in 1808, and in Harrisburg in 1812. Even Lancaster, a predominantly German town, introduced English sermons in its Lutheran church in 1815, although there the

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12 Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, Jan. 15, 1790.
16 Wansey, An Excursion to the United States, p. 168.
practice of holding occasional German services was continued until 1851. According to the report of one contemporary observer, however, as early as 1794 most inhabitants sent their children to English schools. The German-Lutheran synod of Tennessee, which adopted German expressly as its official language because "we find very few entirely English preachers who accept the doctrines of our church, or desire to preach them," had likewise to change to English after a few years.

How much ground the German churches had lost by 1815 is clearly reflected in Oscar Seidensticker's bibliography of early German-language publications in this country. While in 1775 most of these publications were of religious character, by 1815 they were practically all newspapers and almanacs. It is interesting to note in this connection that none of these papers appeared in the larger cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. It was only in Allentown, Easton, Lancaster, Reading, and other small towns that they survived.

Because of the difficulty of maintaining the use of the German tongue in the cities of the eastern seaboard the Deutsche Gesellschaft der Stadt New York after 1790 accepted non-Germans as members and in 1796 made English its official language. The Deutsche Gesellschaft von Pennsylvanien, while it did not introduce English officially until 1818, had non-Germans among its members and officers as early as 1795. English speeches were made in the New York organization in 1789 and in the Baltimore one in 1791.

The oldest German settlements in Pennsylvania and North Carolina maintained a certain resistance against this process of Americanization. To their natural conservatism was added the

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23 American Daily Advertiser, Dec. 31, 1795.
24 New York Daily Advertiser, Nov. 14, 1789. That the oration at Steuben's funeral would be held in German was expressly stated in invitations and announcements. New York Daily Advertiser, Jan. 1, 1795.
25 Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, Feb. 11, 1791.
firm conviction that increasing assimilation involved degeneration in morals and religion and should therefore be opposed. In some Pennsylvania localities the German tongue was kept alive in the peculiar form of Pennsylvania Dutch, an outgrowth of south German dialects modified by English; but in the North Carolina settlements it had completely given way to English by 1825.

It is evident that under these circumstances the German element as such could exercise only a negligible influence on the political life of the young nation. Moreover, whatever political activities Germans carried on at that time were necessarily concentrated in Pennsylvania, where their number was still considerable, in some sections surpassing by far that of even their English and Scotch-Irish neighbors. According to contemporaries Germans constituted a quarter of the entire population of the commonwealth, and in a handbill issued on the occasion of the congressional election in 1788 they were estimated at as high as a third, a figure which has been supported by Professor Faust's researches.

Although lacking in political training, the Pennsylvania Germans were beginning about this time to take an increasingly active interest in the affairs of state and nation. Many were now living in towns and cities and thus kept in touch with the political developments of the day. The economic implications of the British pre-Revolutionary policies and of the recent war had taught them an impressive lesson as to the effectiveness and importance of political action. The tangible results of their newly awakened concern soon became evident: to the first national House of Representatives Pennsylvania sent three German delegates, and of the members of the current Pennsylvania legislature about a sixth were of German stock.

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30 Pennsylvania Packet, Nov. 19, 1788; American Daily Advertiser, July 16, 1795.
31 New York Daily Advertiser, July 22, 1791.
German element in political affairs had become is illustrated in the fact that in the first city council of Baltimore in 1796 three of the seven aldermen were Germans. This proportion was especially remarkable because naturalized citizens' right to vote and eligibility to public office were subject to severe restrictions in Maryland.

But even in Pennsylvania, where their number was largest, the Germans as such never united for political ends. The fact that there was really no "German" element but rather a mixture of Palatines, Wurttembergers, Prussians, and others was not responsible; nor did rivalries of the various sects stand insurmountably in the way of political union. Lack of unity was a result of an overwhelming interest in the economic, social, and political rivalries that dominated communities. In fact, the differences were those which divided the entire nation, of which the German element had become an integral part.

Naturally most German political activities were carried on in Philadelphia, at that time the nation's capital. But the many German business men and the hundreds of German laborers, mechanics, and small tradesmen in the city paid little attention to their common German background. Their political stands were determined by their personal interests, which led them necessarily into opposite camps.

All over the country German merchants and manufacturers followed Hamilton's principles of federalism. They were well aware of the need for a strong central government to afford com-

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84 Trade and other professional organizations were among the most important centers of organized political activities at that time. *New York Daily Advertiser*, Apr. 18, 1789; *New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, Jan. 14, 1797.
85 The dividing lines according to sectional and other necessities were clearly mirrored in the German press. Like the American papers whose views they made their own in all important questions, the German journals were divided into Federalist and anti-Federalist publications. The editors fought with the same bitterness and violence as did their American colleagues. As a matter of fact, the only feature which distinguished German from American papers was occasional debates on the language question. See Knauss, *Social Conditions among the Pennsylvania Germans*, pp. 160 ff.
merce and industry protection after the setback suffered since the close of the war. The German Society of New York City, whose members were mostly business men, was among the first advocates of the "Buy American" policy, and German business men were active likewise in the Baltimore Manufacturing Company, founded in 1789 for the promotion of American products. Germans appear also to have been among the promoters of a road-construction program which the colonial regime of the Quakers had deliberately neglected. At the same time they advocated the assumption of the war debts by the federal government. With their American business friends they welcomed Hamilton's project for a United States bank and his revenue scheme, which included customs duties to protect manufacturing industries. Furthermore, they readily agreed to excises on whisky and sugar, which would have to be borne by the agricultural sections. The Jay treaty, concluded in 1794, was clearly another victory for mercantile and manufacturing interests, for it guaranteed the safety of foreign commercial relations and reestablished public and private credit. It was, on the other hand, decidedly disadvantageous to agricultural interests; it postponed without compensation the surrender of a number of western posts, ceded territory to settlers under British titles, and renounced all indemnification claims resulting from the illegal carrying off of negroes at the close of the war. The deciding vote in favor of ratification of the treaty was cast by Speaker Frederick August Muhlenberg, who had for years been closely affiliated with Philadelphia business circles. As chairman of the committee of the whole he upheld President Washington's refusal to submit to the House all correspondence concerning the treaty, thus making its speedy ratification possible.

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27 Pennsylvania Packet, Jan. 19, 1789. See also T. Cooper, Some Information Respecting America (London, 1795), p. 68.
28 Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, May 15, 1789.
30 American Daily Advertiser, Aug. 22, 26, 1795; Charleston City Gazette & Daily Advertiser, Sept. 7, 9, 18, 1795; Report by Rev. H. Muhlenberg, Amerikanisches Magazin (Hamburg, 1796), vol. i, part iii, p. 132.
31 As in all momentous questions throughout his career Muhlenberg changed his stand before the final decision. Thus in 1795 he participated in a meeting of Philadelphia citizens protesting against the ratification of the treaty and helped to draft a memorial to President Washington to that effect. Charleston City Gazette & Daily Advertiser, Aug. 12, 17, 1795.
32 When Jay ran for governor of New York in 1795, many German business men were among his supporters. New York Daily Advertiser, Mar. 9, 1795.
German mechanics and laborers, many of whom had established new homes in Philadelphia and had played an important part in the movement for independence, naturally sided with Jefferson. They were especially active in putting forth the rights of the common man. Of the organizations which sprang up after the outbreak of the French Revolution to promote these rights and champion the cause of freedom and equality, the German Republican Society of Philadelphia, founded even before the corresponding American organization, the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, was among the first. These groups advocated the establishment of public schools, the opening of the western territories, free navigation of the Mississippi river, and repeal of excise on distilled liquors. From the outset they opposed the Jay treaty as a jeopardization of their economic interests. Anxious to safeguard their constitutional rights, they saw in the appointment of Jay as negotiator a violation of the Constitution, since a member of the judiciary should not have been given an executive mission.

The Democratic Society of Pennsylvania and the German Republican Society evidently worked in close cooperation. Like all other republican societies of that time, however, they appear to have limited their political activities mainly to the drawing up of high-sounding resolutions, although occasionally the German organization spurred ahead of the other in liveliness. Even so, they were not altogether without influence. In 1794 Philadelphia, which up to then had been overwhelmingly Federalist, elected a member of the Democratic Society as representative to Congress; and in New York, another stronghold of conservatism, a member of the New York Democratic Society defeated the Federalist candidate.

45 The Democratic Society of Pennsylvania was organized only after Genêt's visit to Philadelphia. American Daily Advertiser, July 13, 1793. David Rittenhouse became its first chairman and Michael Leib, a secretary of the German Republican Society, became one of its officers.
46 American Daily Advertiser, May 12, June 18, 1794; New York Daily Advertiser, June 19, 1794.
47 American Daily Advertiser, Mar. 24, 1795.
The French envoy Genét on his arrival in America found the societies at the height of their popularity. Among his most enthusiastic welcomers were the German republicans. David Rittenhouse was chairman of the Philadelphia citizens' reception committee. The German Republican Society greeted Genét as the forerunner "of the millenium of political happiness"; and later when anti-French Federalists sought to put a stop to his troublesome activities, this organization defended him warmly.

Apart from drawing up resolutions the main activity of the democratic societies seems to have consisted of social gatherings. The toasts proposed at their banquets, always faithfully reported in the press, were a fairly reliable barometer of the feelings which animated the organizations. Sentiments expressed at the celebrations of the German Republican Society were noteworthy for the conspicuous absence of allusions to anything German. The members felt themselves "true and unbiased Americans," a point of view which even their most rabid opponents did not dare contest. Those belonging to even the nonpolitical German Society of Pennsylvania, founded expressly "for the Relief of Emigrants from Germany," thought of their "brothers in Germany" only after they had drunk toasts to the United States, France, the Irish, and all mankind. When Baron Steuben died, the German Society of New York City paid tribute to him as a group of American citizens.

Toward the end of the decade, however, a change suddenly became noticeable. The second toast made at the anniversary dinner of the New York German society in 1797 was "to Germany, our mother country, and the Sons of Herman." This allusion was not just an accident. The reign of terror in France and the indiscretion of Genét in America had by this time made

48 American Daily Advertiser, May 18, 1793.
49 Ibid., May 20, 1793.
50 Ibid., extra, Mar. 15, 1794.
51 Ibid., May 5, 1794, July 31, 1794; Federal Gazette & Baltimore Daily Advertiser, Jan. 9, 1796. Nor was any one of the various German flags ever displayed on such occasions. American Daily Advertiser, May 5, 1795.
52 Ibid., extra, Mar. 15, 1794.
53 Ibid., Jan. 2, 1795.
the cause of the French revolutionaries very unpopular. It therefore seemed advisable to submerge French sympathies and to stress instead the conservative German background.

The German Republican Society, like all other democratic clubs, was constantly opposed by the Federalists. It and similar organizations were accused of being responsible for the outbreak of the Whisky Rebellion. Even President Washington shared the belief that French revolutionaries under the cover of the republican societies were the guiding spirit of that insurrection. He also questioned the legality of these "self-created" organizations, thus beginning a bitter controversy. But the societies, although they did consider the excise on whisky unconstitutional, emphatically denied any connection with the rebellion itself. Those of their members who had participated in the riots, they insisted, had done so only as individuals. Investigators have never proved any association of the societies as such with the insurrection. The charge may have been merely a political maneuver to embarrass them and to deprive them of their following. If so, it was evidently successfully, for they began to disappear soon afterwards.

Germans in the rural sections of Pennsylvania were Americanized much more slowly than were those in urban centers. To their inborn conservatism was added their lack of intimate contact with the English-speaking population which sped the absorption of German city dwellers. Where such contact existed, they of course felt as American as any German in Philadelphia or New York.

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[7] Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, Jan. 16, 1789. "The German farmers who cross the Susquehanna to settle there, and especially the younger generation," a French traveler noted, "take . . . the habits of the Irish. You notice especially the clothing of the German farmers and their wives who have an opportunity to see other examples than their father's and mother's; they have English or American clothing, and from clothes it will pass to house-furnishings, etc." Cazenove Journal 1794, R. W. Kelsey, editor, Haverford College Studies No. 13 (Haverford, 1922), pp. 84-85.
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In general, however, they kept to themselves and shunned any active participation in the political affairs of the young nation. Sometimes they went so far as to maintain deliberately the German character of their settlements by buying up the lands of non-Germans in their midst and selling them to none but German farmers. Likewise sons and daughters often established their homes near those of their parents instead of following their more adventurous American contemporaries westward.

The French revolutionaries, who found some of their most ardent followers among the German laborers and mechanics of the eastern cities, had hardly any sympathizers among the German settlers of the back country. The latter, independent farmers that they were, were little concerned with questions of freedom and equality. A republican society was finally founded in Lancaster in January, 1795, but it never had more than twelve members, of whom allegedly only five ever attended the meetings. In Reading, another predominantly German settlement, the organization of a democratic society was impossible.

The particularism of the rural Germans was strikingly revealed in 1794 during the Whisky Rebellion. Hamilton's revenue scheme providing for an excise on domestic spirits to help meet the rising expenditures connected with the execution of his financial program affected especially the farmers in the frontier regions of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina, who for a long time had been turning their corn and rye into whisky. The product was useful as a barter article, could be more easily transported to the markets of the East than grain, and was at the same time the only alcoholic beverage obtainable in those sections. The proposed levy, obviously for the distinct benefit of a single class, meant a heavy burden, which the farmers were not willing to bear. Moreover, it reminded immigrant agrarians of their

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Notes:
* American Daily Advertiser, Jan. 26, 1795.
* De la Rochefoucault Liancourt, Travels, vol. i, p. 80.
* Ibid., p. 50.
European past, made intolerable by taxes. To them the excise seemed a step back into the medieval tyranny which they had thought they had happily escaped.

Although the German farmers concurred with their English and Scotch-Irish neighbors in their hatred of the proposed excise on whisky, the majority of them did not join the insurgents, who intended to resist any attempt on the part of the government to collect the new tax. It was not that they felt the levy less than the rest; on the contrary, they were on the whole probably hit harder by it, since because of their industry and efficiency their output surpassed that of the others. But always reluctant to take an aggressive part in any political action, they were definitely opposed to a movement which proposed to defy openly the government at Washington.

Distrust of the English leaders also kept them from joining the rebels. Thus the insurrection found most of its supporters in those counties in which the German element was weakest.

The few Germans who did side with the insurgents were, however, especially bitter opponents of the government; they were among the last to submit to the provisions of settlement reached at Pittsburgh in September, 1794. Easily imposed upon by agents provocateurs because of their ignorance of the English language, they did not realize the hopelessness of their fight against the overwhelming power of the federal military forces.

The German element, again partially because of misunderstanding, was deeply involved in the Fries rebellion of the winter of 1798-99. The leader of the insurrection, a German by the name of Johann Fries, roused his friends throughout Bucks, Northampton, and Montgomery counties in eastern Pennsylvania against a direct tax on houses, lands, and slaves which Congress had passed to meet the cost of maintaining strong military and naval forces for an apparently imminent war against France.

So did the German Republican Society. American Daily Advertiser, June 18, 1794; New York Daily Advertiser, June 19, 1794.


See J. B. MacMaster, A History of the People of the United States (New York, 1885), vol. ii, p. 434; W. W. H. Davis, The Fries Rebellion (Doylestown, 1899); and The Two Trials of John Fries on an Indictment
censed already by the stories of agitators that the alien and sedition laws had been aimed directly at them, they were easily convinced that the tax on houses and lands was designed as a special punishment of the Germans. Politicians eager to discredit the administration of John Adams gladly added fuel to the fire. Moreover, personal jealousies and a burning hatred of the assessors deepened the resentment, and thus the antagonism toward the federal government developed gradually into open resistance against the collection of a comparatively light tax. Men who had refused to become greatly concerned over a heavy excise on distilled liquors now, in the belief that they were being imposed upon, defied the administration. Such was the bitterness in the German settlements that even women came to the aid of the insurgents by throwing hot water on the approaching assessors.

The insurrection was, however, quickly suppressed without bloodshed. Fries was convicted of high treason. That he was of German stock was significantly enough not considered a reason for excluding jurors of German descent. As a matter of fact, far from being prejudiced in favor of the defendant, one of the German jurors later proved to have been prejudiced against him to such a degree that a new trial had to be granted. Incidentally, two German members of the first jury were found to know so little English that they required the services of an interpreter to enable them to follow the procedure.

Shortly after his conviction Fries was pardoned by President Adams and subsequently given a commission as a lieutenant colonel in the militia. Adams, aware of the growing disaffection of the German element, probably hoped thus to secure the support of the eastern counties in the coming presidential election. But his administration never enjoyed much popularity with the majority of the rural Germans. His favoritism toward mercantile

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for Treason (Philadelphia, 1800). See also the New York Spectator for March 23, April 10, and April 13, 1799; the Aurora for April 3, 8, 11, and 13, 1799; and the American Daily Advertiser for April 13, 1799.

The tax commissioner, Jacob Eyerley, had previously been defeated as a candidate for Congress and was very unpopular in the district. See the Aurora for December 13, 1799.

Ibid., April 5, 1799. The Fries rebellion was for this reason called also the "Hot-Water War."

See The Two Trials of John Fries on an Indictment for Treason, Appendix, pp. 11 ff.

Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser, August 12, 1800.
interests antagonized all agricultural sections, and his tax pro-
gram was scarcely less offensive. Germans in particular opposed
the president on the additional ground that he was known to be
one of the strongest objectors to further immigration. Not long
before the election of 1800 there was published in a number of
newspapers a letter he had written some years before in which he
warned the country of the growing peril of foreigners, who "will
endanger and destroy our peace, if we know not how to govern
them. They will moreover corrupt our elections and tear us to
pieces."\textsuperscript{80}

The traditionally conservative German farmers, ranked among
the staunchest supporters of the Federalists even as late as 1796,
began to turn to Jeffersonian democracy. In the gubernatorial
election of 1799 their vote went to the Democratic candidate Mc-
Kean and against the Federalist incumbent, James Ross. In the
presidential election of 1800 they contributed to Jefferson's over-
whelming majority in Pennsylvania and in New York and Vir-
ginia as well. President Adams blamed his loss of German-
dominated Lancaster, York, and Bucks counties on the influence
of the brothers Muhlenberg, who, he claimed, had violently at-
tacked his administration after their request for appointment to
public office had been denied.\textsuperscript{81} While the Muhlenbergs may
have contributed to Adams' defeat, German defection was in-
spired mostly by the obnoxious political acts and the personal un-
popularity of the president.

Significant too in alienating the Germans from the Federalists
were the rumors spread in the late nineties that a change in the
form of government from a republic to a monarchy was imminent.
If they had forgotten everything else about their European past,
the Germans still retained a vivid memory of the monarchies under
which they themselves or their parents had once slaved. They
were not willing to see the unhappy experiences revived, for they
had risen far above the meek and exploited serfs as which they or
their fathers had left Germany.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., September 13, 1800.
\textsuperscript{81} John Adams, \textit{Works}. Edited by C. F. Adams (Boston, 1856), vol. x,
p. 120.