



## IN HISTORY: IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HERITAGE

# Time Line

## World War I and Immigration Policies Affect Indiana

World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, significantly affected life throughout North America and much of Europe. Immigration to Indiana was restricted during the war, and many expressions of virulent racism took place. The patriotism of ethnic communities whose countries of origin were fighting American allies was intensely challenged in the English-language press and legislature. The most visible actions were taken against Indiana residents of German descent, even though German American communities were among the oldest and most widespread ethnic groups in the state. During World War I, the German language was banned in schools, churches, and on the streets. In May 1917 the reenactment of the 1798 Alien Act required non-citizens to register as enemy aliens or face arrest and prison. Enemy aliens were considered residents of foreign birth who had not yet completed the two sets of registration papers required for naturalization. Eventually, institutions also felt the effects of restrictions on German culture. For example, the German-American Bank changed its name to Lincoln National Bank, and communities such as New Germany, Indiana, changed their names. Several local German newspapers, such as the *Evansville Demokrat*, were pressured to stop publishing.

Hoosier German American author Kurt Vonnegut Jr. described his experience:

As I have said in other books, the anti-Germanism in this country during the First World War so shamed and dismayed my parents that they resolved to raise me without acquainting me with the language or the literature of the music of the oral family histories which my ancestors loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism. This was done with surprising meekness by many, many German-American families in Indianapolis, it seems to me. Uncle John [Rauch—a prominent Indianapolis lawyer] almost seems to boast of this dismantling and quiet burial of a culture, a culture which surely would have been of use to me today.

Source: Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York: 1981), 21.

Immigrant communities in Indiana were never completely assimilated. Many newcomers and long-standing ethnic groups retained their original languages and continued to celebrate the customs, music, and traditions they had brought with them

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from their homelands. Community life often centered on ethnic cultural organizations and clubs or religious centers. Churches and other places of worship have been described as the last stronghold of Old World (European) languages and customs. The majority of immigrants from eastern Europe during this era were members of Orthodox communities. Latinos (that is, people of Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, and other North and Central American Spanish-speaking countries) were predominantly Roman Catholic. Other religions included Christian Baptists and Methodists as well as Jewish faiths. These institutions often encouraged the use of a community's original language in religious activities. Other elements of worship—iconography (paintings of religious figures), music, food, and clothing—also helped to reinforce and celebrate a community's cultural heritage.