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Martin W. Oefele. *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863-1867.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xviii + 320 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2692-3.

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The American Civil War and Race in Transatlantic Perspective

This book sets out to describe how German-speaking officers "felt and acted during their service" with African American troops during the American Civil War (p. xvi). Martin Oefele undertook exhaustive research in more than forty archives in the United States, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland to answer the question. The impressiveness of the research is matched by his careful interpretation of the evidence.

It is difficult to generalize about the people at the center of the inquiry. Oefele convincingly shows that German-speakers in the United States and in the officer corps of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) represented a diverse group. They emigrated from European states that would be encompassed in the unified German Reich of 1871, but also from the Habsburg Empire and Switzerland. They included German-speaking Danes, Poles, and Hungarians. In the United States, both the Democratic and Republican parties found supporters among German-speaking immigrants, who divided on the question of the abolition of slavery. A similar diversity existed in German Americans' attitudes toward African Americans, ranging from ardent white supremacists to proponents of radical racial egalitarianism. Oefele effectively conveys a description of German ethnics that is more complex than the conventional story that reduces the group to a few well-known participants in the revolutions of 1848.

During the American Civil War, the Union moved haltingly to draw on the manpower reserves of African Americans in what became a war of attrition against the Confederacy. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union eventually formed the USCT in the spring of 1863. Army commanders held the conviction that black troops required leadership by white officers. The War Department decided to select officers for the USCT on the basis of an examination system rather than permitting state officials to appoint commanders and allowing enlisted men to elect lower-ranking officers. The meritocratic system offered a unique opportunity for advancement in the officer corps of the USCT to German ethnics who often faced obstacles from Anglo-Americans in white units. On the other hand, service with African Americans carried a powerful stigma in white Northern society, which generally remained convinced of its racial superiority. Oefele has found that 265 German-speaking immigrants served as officers in the USCT during the war and Reconstruction.

The sources ultimately prove frustratingly meager in illuminating these men's experiences in the USCT. Oefele, a careful historian, acknowledges gaps in the evidence. "Few sources," he writes, "reveal anything about wartime interactions between black soldiers and Germans" (p. 29). Elsewhere he notes that "unfortunately not much evidence exists that tells about everyday relations between the immigrants and the black soldiers" (p. 159). Oefele wisely eschews speculation to fill the gaps, but effectively makes the most of his material in describing the outlooks of participants in this encounter.

While the reader may at times wish that the subjects of the history had left more revealing evidence, Oefele's account of the service of German-speaking officers in the USCT illuminates at least two broad questions. First, what does that service tell us about the way German Americans came to find a place within American society? Second, does the story of German speakers usefully expand the inquiry beyond national boundaries to a transatlantic history?

The German-speaking immigrant officers, Oefele shows, like their men in the USCT, generally regarded their service as an opportunity to validate their credentials as Americans to a skeptical northern society. German immigrants willingly paid the price of service with black troops, whom many of them scorned, in order to obtain advancement in the Union cause. A few German ethnics clearly embraced the goal of emancipation, and generally may have been willing to serve in the USCT be-

cause they were less deeply immersed in the prevailing racism than Anglo-Americans. The desire to aid in the fight for African American dignity, however, proved ultimately to be ephemeral. After the war's conclusion, the German-speaking officers "did not feel obligated to continue the fight for black freedom" (p. 227). Few German-speaking veterans broadcast their service in the USCT after the war. Over the long term, German-Americans successfully assimilated in the United States as they embraced the privileges of inclusion in white America. The memory of German immigrant service with African-American troops was generally downplayed as irrelevant to the more potent story of German-American sacrifice in the white Union Army.

Oefele's book places the American Civil War in a transatlantic context. At the most basic level, he uses evidence from European archives to tell his story. More significantly, the study contextualizes the events of the 1860s in the United States within the history of the growth of European nationalism, the revolutions of 1848, and circulating ideas about race. These long-term historical currents shaped, and were reflected in, the biographies of a few remarkable men who became officers in the USCT. Ladislas Zsulavszki, for example, the nephew of the Hungarian national patriot Lajos Kossuth, fought in Italy as a member of Giuseppe Garibaldi's forces before becoming an officer commanding a regiment of African Americans. Zsulavszki seemed to regard the war as a romantic adventure and an opportunity for African Americans to prove their dignity. Edelmiro Mayer was born in Argentina of German immigrant parents. He fought for Argentina before immigrating to the United States in 1861 to teach at West Point. He advocated abolition and joined the USCT in 1863. Following the war's conclusion, he moved on to Mexico in support of the Mexican Revolution. These examples testify to the existence of an international stratum of cosmopolitan nationalists. Curiously enough, they had a history of fighting for the advance of nationalism on several fronts, Hungarian, Italian, American, and Mexican. Their cases suggest that the American Civil War may be usefully viewed not only as a particularly American phenomenon, but also as a reflection of broader developments in world history.

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