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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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A Shunned Legacy Resurrected

In late January 1863, the Union War Department acquiesced to the urgent pleas of Governor John Albion Andrew of Massachusetts and granted him permission to create a "special corps" consisting of "persons of African descent." A committed abolitionist, Andrew desired that his pet experiment, better known as the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, should become "a model for all future Colored Regiments" raised for the Union Army. He realized that proper leadership would be essential to the regiment's success, and he offered commissions to young white gentlemen "of military experience, of firm Anti-slavery principles, ambitious, superior to a vulgar contempt for color, and having faith in the capacity of Colored men for military service."[1] In Andrew's opinion, no one fit that description better than the 54th Massachusetts' first colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, the son of wealthy abolitionists from Boston. Thanks to the artistry of sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens and the 1989 film, *Glory*, Shaw has become the icon representing those white Northerners who risked social ostracism and summary execution to lead the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) in the latter half of the American Civil War.

Yet most of the 7,122 men who served as officers in black Union regiments did not speak with the clipped, cultured tones of a Boston Brahmin. In fact, a significant number were immigrants, and more than 250 of them uttered their commands with a German accent. In *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863-1867*, Martin W. Öfele makes a unique contribution to the growing historical literature on the U.S. Colored Troops. An assistant professor of American history at the University of Munich, Öfele has exploited a vast array of archival and print sources, including many in German that have never been examined by other Civil War scholars. The result is a rich and thoroughly researched monograph that explores the backgrounds, motivations, wartime experiences, and postwar fates of a select group of immigrants. These men not only risked their lives to preserve their adopted country, but they also volunteered to stand at the cutting edge of the social revolution unleashed by the struggle to preserve the Union.

More than 400 German-speaking immigrants applied for commissions in the U.S. Colored Troops, and 265 survived the screening process and actually served with black regiments. Öfele points out that the majority of these men (81.5 percent) came from Prussia and the other German states that Otto von Bismarck forged into a unified Germany half a decade after the Civil War, but 9.4 percent hailed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 4.5 percent were Swiss, and 4.2 percent were Danish. German-speaking officers would participate in nearly every major battle involving the Union's black defenders. While most of these immigrant USCT officers were educated and belonged to the middle or upper classes, relatively few came from liberal or progressive households. Devotion to the Union provided the primary motivation for their seeking commissions in black regiments. Some simply desired higher rank and the increased privileges and material benefits that came with it. Others wanted to distance themselves from the unmilitary informality that reigned in so many white volunteer regiments. They expected the U.S. Colored Troops to conform more closely to European military culture, where officers and enlisted men occupied separate spheres and the lower ranks did not think themselves the equals of their commanders.

Despite these elitist notions, German-speaking USCT officers tended to believe that the authority and prestige that came with wearing shoulder straps demanded that they accept a high degree of responsibility for their troops. Thanks to this sense of *noblesse oblige*, most of these immigrants got along well with their subordinates. Shared hardships and dangers (including discrimination by white Northerners and draconian threats from Confederates outraged by the Union Army's resort to African American manpower) caused foreign-born officers to bond more closely with their black subordinates.

Some immigrants shed their own racial prejudices, although only a handful recorded how they felt about serving with soldiers of color.

The conspicuous participation of German immigrants in the Civil War helped to further integrate them into American society. Several German-speaking USCT officers assumed positions of influence in the postwar decades, but most pursued the path of success by concealing their service with the Union Army's 178,895 black soldiers. During the war, the North's German-language press largely ignored or disparaged the U.S. Colored Troops. When immigrant officers finally shed their uniforms and returned home, they tended to become absorbed in their own ethnic environments. Realizing that their service in black regiments was a liability, they obscured their military records, seeking credit merely for fighting to preserve the Union. According to Öfele, only two immigrant officers who made no secret of their USCT affiliations achieved major success as civilians. Col. Ignatz Kappner of the 3rd U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery settled in St. Louis, where he became the partner of Joseph Pulitzer and co-editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Lt. Peter Karberg of the 51st U.S. Colored Infantry also pursued a distinguished career as a journalist by editing German-language newspapers in Michigan and Nebraska. A Prussian, Colonel Carl Bentzoni of the 56th U.S. Colored Infantry, entered the American regular army after the war and devoted the rest of his military career to serving with black troops. He retired in October 1894 as the lieutenant colonel of the 25th U.S. Infantry.

Öfele's book is bound to be compared to the first social history of the U.S. Colored Troops, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* by Joseph T. Glatthaar, which appeared in 1990. Other recent studies have challenged some of Glatthaar's glibber generalizations, but Öfele's reading of the sources causes him to close ranks with *Forged in Battle*. In particular, Öfele supports Glatthaar's theme of wartime bonding between white officers and black soldiers followed by postwar alienation.

What makes *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863-1867* stand out, however, is Öfele's clear-sighted focus on a specific segment of the USCT officer corps. Öfele deserves praise for setting this story in proper context by sketching the political and ethnic diversity of America's prewar German population. Students of history and memory will also appreciate Öfele's epilogue, which traces how German-Americans created their own Civil War myths to promote ethnic and historical continuity. While depicting themselves as staunch supporters of Abraham Lincoln and the Union, Americans of German descent produced Civil War narratives that minimized or ignored the role African Americans played in winning their own freedom–a development that also occurred in mainstream America. German-speaking USCT officers, unwilling to antagonize their neighbors and jeopardize their standing in postwar society, failed to demand a more inclusive and accurate Civil War historiography. Thus, the very men who acted as leading agents of social change during America's bloodiest armed conflict became mute accomplices in racist repression and betrayed their own legacy after the guns fell silent. Students of the Civil War era should be grateful to Professor Öfele for reconstructing that legacy in this important contribution.

Note

[1]. Gregory J. W. Urwin, "I Want You to Prove Yourselves Men," *Civil War Times Illustrated* (December 1989), 42-43.

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