

JÖrgen Macha, Andrea Wolf, Hrsg. *Michael Zimmer's Diary: Ein Deutsches Tagebuch aus dem Amerikanischen BÖrgerkrieg*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2001. xxxv + 214 pp. \$43.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-631-38825-9.

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## An Historical Document Caught Between Interdisciplinary Fronts

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Jürgen Macha of the Westfälische Wilhelms University of Münster and Joseph C. Salmons of the University of Wisconsin at Madison decided to launch a book series dedicated to editing primary historical documents written in German in North America. They did this in order to make a portion of the vast amount of letters, diaries, official documents, and memoirs that tell German immigrant history accessible, “with partial translations, commentary from specialists in the relevant disciplines and scholarly annotations.” If one considers this goal verbatim, it remains questionable whether *Michael Zimmer's Diary*, the first bi-lingual study to appear in the new Peter Lang series and entitled “History of the German Language in America—Sources and Studies”, really meets the high standard set in the introduction.

The reader gets to know the basics of Zimmer's life: Georg Michael Zimmer, born in 1824 in the Palatinate town of Kandel and trained as a carpenter, emigrated to Philadelphia in 1846. After working there as a baker he volunteered for service in the Mexican War. Following his service, Zimmer moved to Illinois, married a woman from Baden and started a family. In the mid-1850s, the Zimmers bundled up their five children and moved to Burlington, Wisconsin. Michael Zimmer enlisted with the 9th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, originally an ethnic German regiment, and served from 1861 to 1864 as Sergeant of the “Burlington Rifles” (Company E) in the

Civil War.

Looking at the first eight pages of Zimmer's diary, the reader finds himself confronted with a memoir of the Mexican War, which is written retrospectively, and describes Zimmer's service in Company A of the Third Artillery Regiment during the Vera Cruz campaign. These pages focus on the battles of Cerro Gordo and Mexico City. Zimmer was wounded and received his discharge on August 18, 1848. In his memoirs, he spells General Winfield Scott as “General Sckoth”. Only on page nine does Zimmer start anew with a diary pinning down the day-to-day events he encountered during his service with the 9th Wisconsin Volunteers.

The diary contains nothing spectacular and certainly does not stand out as a unique testimony of a German Union soldier—especially when compared to Wolfgang Helbich's and Walter D. Kamphoefner's *Deutsche im Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg* (2002), in which they collected fifty-seven series of Civil War letters of German-born soldiers. It is, however, noteworthy and rather unique that Michael Zimmer volunteered in both wars—the Mexican War as well as the Civil War. His reason for doing this might have been continuous poverty as Army pay did promise a steady income.

The diary exhibits an abundance of “Germanized” appellatives, which can only be appreciated by those linguists, historians, and general readers, who know both languages, e.g. “Sidisins” (citizens), “Grinbäcks” (greenbacks), “Atwänz Gard” (advance guard), “distscharch”

(discharge), “Räwiu” (review) or toponyms such as “Pheith Bloff” (Pine Bluff), “Gwinzy” (Quincy, Illinois), “Misury Rärer” (Missouri River) or “Sändlouis” (St. Louis).

The original of Zimmer’s diary was bequeathed to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison in 1974 by Zimmer’s granddaughter Edna Zimmer. Interestingly enough, there are two diaries, a smaller and a larger one. This made it difficult for the editors to determine when each was written (despite the remarks by Richard Bazillion added in 1978, shedding some light on the *Überlieferungsgeschichte*). One seemed to be the transcription of the other with no firm evidence to indicate which was the earlier version. Macha and Wolf decided that the smaller-sized volume was the original. Dorothea Raspe indeed produced a fine English translation of the German diary (pp. 114-209), but inevitably lost much of Zimmer’s “local color”. This cannot be prevented when translating a text of this nature. The editors added a linguistically helpful glossary of Germanized-terms and English translations of German words (pp. 210-14).

There is little to find of the “scholarly annotations” and “commentary from specialists” promised to the reader in Joseph C. Salmons’ English introduction to Michael Zimmer’s diary. The diary does not contain a single footnote to elaborate on locations, battle scenes, persons, or political issues of the time. No mention is made about a number of secondary sources that do describe various aspects of life in the 9th Wisconsin Infantry and could thus serve as additional information. These include Edward Ruegger’s “Five weeks of my Army Life,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 37 (1954), Bernhard Domschke’s *Twenty Months in Captivity: Memoirs of a Union Officer in Confederate Prisons* (1987) or Louis F. Kakuske’s *A Civil War Drama: The Adventures of a Union Soldier in Southern Imprisonment* (1970).

If it were not for Richard H. Zeitlin’s short survey of the history of the 9th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry (pp. xxxi-xxxv), the general reader would not be able to apprehend Zimmer’s service in a unique and rather “famous” German-American regiment. Zeitlin, who has been Director of the Wisconsin Veterans Museum since 1990, has published a number of books, among them *Old Abe the War Eagle: A True Story of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1986), as well as *The Flags of the Iron Brigade* (1998), but he certainly cannot be considered a Civil War specialist. For this specific edition, it would have been helpful, considering the general lack of historical background information, to secure the co-editorship of a Civil

War historian—someone like William L. Burton, whose *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union’s Ethnic Regiments* (1988) is still the best one-volume coverage of the history of ethnic Union regiments.[1]

The 9th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry was raised by Prussian-born Colonel Friedrich Salomon (mistakenly spelled “Solomon” by Zeitlin, p. xxxi), the brother of Wisconsin governor Edward Salomon (1828-1909) in the city of Milwaukee and trained at Camp Sigel. The Salomons were “48ers”, something quite common for the German ethnic leadership in Wisconsin regiments: Forty-eighter Fritz Annecke, for example, led the 34th Wisconsin Infantry, while the 27th Wisconsin Infantry had Colonel Konrad Krez as commander. Lincoln’s call for troops in June of 1862 was met with severe disfavor in Wisconsin, particularly among immigrants, many of whom intensely resented Yankee exploitation and felt less strongly about abolition. Here, too, the editors never questioned Zimmer’s personal motivation for voluntarily joining the army. To make things worse, Governor Salomon issued a proclamation declaring that the draft would be enforced at any cost, eventually arresting one hundred protestors. When Colonel Friedrich Salomon was promoted to the rank of brigadier, another of Salomon’s brothers, Charles, took over the 9th Wisconsin Infantry in 1862.

The 9th Wisconsin had the dubious honor of having missed every major battle of the war, though it lost 191 men during its three years of service. Therefore, it is no surprise that Zimmer’s diary appears rather dull and full of every-day camp routine descriptions. The state of Wisconsin supplied the Federal service with fifty-two regiments, plus cavalry, artillery, sharpshooters, three brigades, scouts, sailors, and so-called Colored Troops. It has been estimated that for every nine persons living in the state, Wisconsin furnished one soldier. Of the 91,379 Wisconsin men in the Union service, 79,934 had volunteered, 11,445 were draftees and substitutes, and approximately 11,583 died of battle wounds or disease. Readers cannot learn any of this from the book.

From a scholarly viewpoint, *Michael Zimmer’s Diary* is a disappointment; it does not live up to its introductory promise, nor will this rather important series so long as its editors neglect the historical context in which the primary document belongs. As long as the scholarly apparatus (such as footnotes and commentary) remains rudimentary, this series will not attract an interdisciplinary audience, nor will it win interdisciplinary acclaim.

Note:

[1]. In *Melting Pot Soldiers* see pp. 109, 202 for the Ninth Wisconsin.

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