

# H-Net Reviews

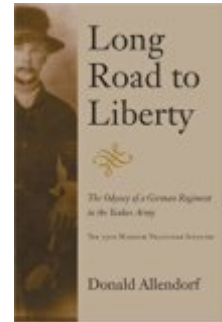
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald Allendorf. *Long Road to Liberty: The Odyssey of a German Regiment in the Yankee Army—the 15th Missouri Volunteer Infantry*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2006. xxvii + 342 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-871-9.

Reviewed by Stephani Richards-Wilson (Marquette University)

Published on H-German (July, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher



## Germans in the War of the West

The American Civil War continues to intrigue scholars and history buffs alike, and many works have been written about the battles, military leaders, and troops in both North and South. This book, however, deals with the war in a lesser-known arena. *Long Road to Liberty* makes a welcome contribution to Civil War historiography and German American studies for several reasons. What sets this monograph apart is its exploration of a neglected group and a forgotten front: German immigrant soldiers serving in Union armies in the western theater, where many saw frequent, direct, and intense combat. Donald Allendorf does an outstanding job of bringing their service and sacrifice to life, and exploits various sources, including letters, diaries, service records, regimental files, state and federal archives, German period newspapers, and secondary literature, to shed light on their motivations, mindset, and courage.

The book is well organized, in twenty-three short chapters, and progresses chronologically from 1861 to 1865. Maps, black and white photographs, and illustrations add perspective and geographical orientation. Personal details about the German immigrant soldiers and their backgrounds, professions, and cultural differences in comparison to native-born Union and Confederate soldiers allow the reader to appreciate the difficulties and challenges Germans encountered on both the home front and battlefield during the conflict.

The regiment Allendorf chose to focus on is note-

worthy in itself as the 820-man 15th Missouri Volunteer Infantry, which consisted initially of primarily German immigrants (close to 75 percent) and hailed from a state with fiercely divided loyalties. St. Louis's large German population supported the Union, but the native-born minority sympathized with the South. Also noteworthy is that compared to native-born soldiers, German-born veterans from Missouri wrote very little about their motives or battlefield experiences afterwards. Despite a lack of abundant primary source material, Allendorf is able to piece together their story by mining state and military archives and the only known firsthand account of the 15th Missouri, written by Maurice Marcoot, a veteran of this Union regiment. Allendorf's research is augmented by his ability to skillfully describe the ebb and flow nature of the several major battles that the regiment experienced. The author's descriptions of events at Stones River, Missionary Ridge, and Spring Hill and Franklin, in particular, bring both the horror and heroism into vivid focus.

German immigrant soldiers made up approximately 10 percent of the Union army and a larger part of the armies that served in the western theater. They tended to be older and better educated than the working-class, native-born soldiers and saw individual rights and freedom as the crux of the conflict. Familiar with discrimination and tyranny from their German homeland, German immigrants volunteered in large numbers at the outbreak of the war in support of the Union Army and its cause.

They did not wait to be drafted and took a strong stance against slavery for both social and economic reasons. Allendorf is quick to point out that in fact, German immigrants broke up the last public sale of slaves in St. Louis. Yet, he observes that they wanted to end slavery for pragmatic reasons as well. Slavery kept wages low for immigrants. Many German immigrants thought that if they could gain a better income, they could achieve the same social status as other white Americans. To start, the army offered regular pay and a hundred-dollar bonus, just for signing up.

Prior to the war, Missouri's German immigrants arrived in waves, but they all shared a desire to make a better life in the New World in America. Referred to as "the Dutch" by native Missourians, two waves of well-educated Germans came for religious reasons in the 1830s. Another wave arrived around 1850, after the failed democratic revolution of 1848 in the German states, and included professionals such as journalists, teachers, and lawyers. Still another wave, mainly comprised of tradesmen and farmers, immigrated for economic reasons and arrived during the decade leading up to the Civil War. Members of all of these groups hoped to gain improved personal liberties. Those that joined the 15th Missouri Volunteer Infantry served almost five years, spoke little to no English, and fought Confederate troops in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia.

The 15th Missouri was one of thirty-nine infantry regiments from that state that fought for the Union. They were also one of the first to go to war, served the longest, and endured the highest percentage of battlefield mortality of all the Union regiments from Missouri. Poor leadership, communications, medical care, and battlefield provisioning make it a wonder that the regiment performed as well as it did in the dozen or so major battles in which its members fought. Soldier families in St. Louis did not fare much better than the troops, given that they had little income with their men away at war.

Allendorf describes the physical wartime hardship and carnage endured by the German regiments at the hands of the enemy, but also the psychological challenges, hostility, and ethnic slurs they suffered at the hands of their Union comrades and Southern sympathizers. Nativism was pervasive at the time and racism was applied to both blacks and members of certain national groups, making serving alongside native-born Americans difficult because bias, discrimination, or favoritism often entered into military affairs. Different religious beliefs, political convictions, and drinking habits, as well as a foreign tongue, a propensity for military drilling, and the perceived rigid discipline of German officers did not endear them to the other infantry units. Allendorf notes that by the end of the war, Germans still made up approximately 10 percent of the Union army, but comprised less than 5 percent of the ranks of brigadier general or higher.

In summary, *Long Road to Liberty* is an important contribution to Civil War scholarship because it underscores the diversity of Union troops, the significance of the western theater in winning the war, and the complexity of the conflict from the perspective of German immigrant soldiers who had recently arrived in America in hopes making better lives. This book will be of interest to historians and general readers alike; however, scholars in German American studies are mostly likely to appreciate Allendorf's nuanced research and diligent defense of "the Dutch." Readers who speak German will find the occasional misspelled German word a minor irritant, but the work in general is a valuable resource in illuminating the nineteenth-century German immigrant experience in the American Civil War. For readers interested in the actual fighting, additional battlefield maps, terrain drawings, and historical illustrations of the physical battle areas would have been helpful to expand their awareness of the courage and sacrifice that Allendorf's narrative so effectively documents.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Stephani Richards-Wilson. Review of Allendorf, Donald, *Long Road to Liberty: The Odyssey of a German Regiment in the Yankee Army—the 15th Missouri Volunteer Infantry*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25017>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.