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Published on H-Nationalism (October, 2016)

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German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era

Germans who migrated to the United States after the Revolutions of 1848, Alison Clark Efford argues, played a critical role in US history. During the antebellum period, they altered the Republican Party by linking immigrant rights with African American rights. In the immediate aftermath of the US Civil War, Germans claimed black suffrage as an immigrant cause. Following the Franco-Prussian War, however, many German immigrants rethought their ideas about citizenship and nationalism and abandoned Reconstruction. By exploring the impact of German immigrants on the United States, Efford highlights an important transnational dimension of the Civil War era and adds to a growing body of scholarship analyzing transnational elements of this period.[1]

In sum, Efford contends that activities of German Americans "not only reflected the rise and fall of liberal nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century United States, they helped ensure it" (p. 2).

Efford begins by analyzing the impact of the Revolutions of 1848 on immigrant ideas about citizenship. Although Germans later became infamous for defining citizenship by blood, participants in the revolutions thought differently and "tied membership in the nation to residence within the state, not cultural background" (p. 30). Immigrants brought these ideas with them to the United States. After their arrival, they began to construct a German ethnicity while maintaining traditions distinguishing them from other people in the US. They insisted that "no nation was truly liberal unless it wholeheartedly embraced cultural pluralism" (p. 44). In other words, German Americans forcefully claimed that cultural background was not an impediment to citizenship. Critically, Germans united pluralism and antislavery and, in so doing, transformed the Republican Party. By coupling immigrant and black rights, German immigrants "paved the way for a language of citizenship unconstrained by race" (p. 55).

Efford notes the contributions of German American soldiers but does not spend much time on the events of the Civil War. Rather, she jumps ahead to Missouri’s 1865 constitution. German Americans claimed black suffrage as a German American cause because they hoped to dis-
mantle the barrier between race and ethnicity. German Americans had always “portrayed respect for immigrants and tolerance of African Americans as two parts of the same liberal impulse” (p. 88). Critically, the political culture of German American Radicalism, Efford argues, represented ethnicity and race as different categories. Efford builds on this analysis in her exploration of the period 1865-69 and charts the emergence of a “politics of principle” which “relegated black rights to an abstract realm” (p. 116). German Radicals disparaged racism while criticizing African Americans. These Radicals believed in uplift, the idea that freedpeople could better themselves, despite “what they considered proof of African American inferiority” (pp. 133-134). In other words, German American principles coexisted with reservations about the freedpeople.

The Franco-Prussian War was a Wendepunkt, or turning point, that changed German immigrant ideas about citizenship. This conflict, Efford asserts, “gave rise to a more essentialist notion of Volk [italics in original]. Its members were believed to share more innate, perhaps biological, characteristics” (p. 145). In other words, the Franco-Prussian War promoted a less liberal language of citizenship because the new German nationalism rested on claims that Germans were predisposed to greatness. Germans, thrilled by their decisive victory over France, modified other ideas. Many German immigrants rejected uplift and argued that certain people were destined to be dominant. This lesson, drawn from the victory in the Franco-Prussian War, was also applied to the United States. Germans also defended the illiberal institutions of the new Reich. Once German immigrants accepted Bismarck, Efford argues, “they were drawn down a path that led away from liberal nationalism” (p. 164).

This Wendepunkt had serious consequences. For one, it drew German Americans into the Liberal Republican Party. In Missouri, German American Liberal Republicans such as Carl Schurz accommodated Democrats, downplayed white southern terrorism, and willingly disregarded the spirit of the Fifteenth Amendment. The German American prioritization of reunion over race can be explained by the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War. Many German immigrants subscribed to the new definition of the Volk, and argued that it was time to bury the old ghosts of the past. As Schurz and others argued, if Forty-Eighters could forgive the Prussian monarchy, there was no reason why northerners could not make peace with southerners. German Americans also took great pride in Prussian administrative institutions and called for civil service reform in the United States. Although German Americans lost their grip on the Liberal Republican Party—and the party disintegrated after losing the election of 1872—the ideas embraced by Liberal Republicans did not disappear. The significantly less liberal nationalism of the Liberal Republicans became ever more popular. In the last chapter, Efford explores how German Americans, particularly Catholics and socialists, participated in the struggle for cultural rights. These groups “contributed to the disputes that strained Northern politics leading into the election of 1876” (p. 201).

German Immigrants is well worth reading. Efford’s transnational analysis highlights the benefits of thinking internationally about topics too often confined to a purely national context. She makes use of a wide array of sources, both in German and English, and has clearly mastered the secondary literature. This thought-provoking book will appeal to a broad academic audience and will prove useful in graduate seminars on nationalism, the US Civil War era, and immigration history.

Note
