

Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory

Aaron Sheehan-Dean

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron (2008) "Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/8>

Review

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron

Winter 2008

Keller, Christian B. *Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory*. Fordham University Press, \$65.00 hardcover ISBN 823226506

Ethnicity and the Civil War

The explosion of social histories of the Civil War over the last two decades has given us a much richer appreciation for the varieties of experience that participants took from the conflict. One area of life still relatively little explored by historians, but nonetheless central to nineteenth-century conceptions of self and community, is ethnicity. This excellent study by Christian Keller, an associate professor of military history at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, adds substantially to our understanding of this aspect of American life at mid-century. Keller's focus is narrow—he explores the participation of German and German-American soldiers (the issue of whether to hyphenate or not is in fact one of his central themes) in the battle of Chancellorsville and the ensuing controversies between Anglo and German communities in the United States over the meaning of that participation. But this tight framing actually allows him great latitude to comment on a wide range of important issues. The battle and its aftermath was important in its own right, arguably the most important event in the history of Germans in nineteenth-century America. Beyond this, however, the topic gives Keller the opportunity to comment on German participation in the war, the process of ethnic identity formation, nativism, and Civil War memory. To all of these subfields, he makes engaging and important contributions.

The book is clearly organized. It begins with two chapters exploring the experiences of German immigrants in the antebellum U.S. and their early participation in Union armies (90 percent of German immigrants lived in the North so very few enlisted in the Confederacy). A middle chapter chronicles the events of the famous Union Eleventh Corps during the battle of Chancellorsville

and the succeeding chapters explore the Anglo American response to the battle, German-American counter-responses, and the subsequent effects on German ethnic identity in America. The Eleventh Corps gained its infamy for being on the receiving end of Stonewall Jackson's surprise assault on the far right side of the Union line during the battle of Chancellorsville. Commanders, including Union General Joseph Hooker, assumed that Lee was retreating to Gordonsville so the attack caught Union troops completely unprepared. Although they offered resistance—exactly how much is an important part of Keller's story—disorganization and high casualties precipitated a retreat, which turned into a flight to safety reminiscent of the Union debacle at the first battle of Bull Run. This episode initiated the collapse the Union offensive at Chancellorsville and Hooker indecisively managed a few more days of bloody engagements before retreating back over the Rapidan River.

In this classic telling of the story, blame for the collapse of the Eleventh Corps lies with the cowardly German troops who filled the unit. Hooker maintained his denunciations of the Dutch for years after the war. For Keller, it is these reactions (and the counter-reactions by German immigrant groups) that prove most valuable for understanding the nature of the war and the process of immigrant assimilation in the United States. The quick judgments made by many Anglo soldiers and newspapermen in the wake of Chancellorsville were surprising because up to that point, German immigrants had been welcomed into the army and their accomplishments celebrated. Keller briefly summarizes the challenges faced by these immigrants in the years before the war when the rise of nativism and the American Party threatened their ability to feel secure in their new home. Germans entered the service enthusiastically and with an eye to establishing themselves as a permanent part of the U.S. Many served in majority-German units from Pennsylvania and New York, complete with German drill practices and German-language field reports. Franz Sigel, the highest-ranking German officer in the Union Army, commanded many of these troops in 1861 and 1862, but his political conflicts with Henry Halleck and the Lincoln administration resulted in his resignation and the elevation of Oliver O. Howard. Keller charts clearly the continuing influence of Sigel and of more junior officers, like Carl Schurz, who occupied special places as spokesmen for the community within the North. Indeed, one of Keller's main accomplishments is demonstrating the extent to which the antagonism of Anglo Americans during the war helped consolidate a previously divided German identity. The scorn and criticism heaped on German soldiers after Chancellorsville actually made

Germans both more internally cohesive (overcoming important divisions among refugee groups from the 1848 Revolutions) and less American. In this respect, Keller adds to a growing body of literature on the ways that foreign ethnicities emerged most clearly in North America. Scholars like Michl Gomez and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall have demonstrated the shifting nature of African identities in the New World during the eighteenth century. Keller offers us something similar for European migrants in the nineteenth century.

Keller's detailed, but cogent, recreation of the clash between the Eleventh Corps and Jackson's forces substantiates his conclusion that considering the poor tactical situation in which they found themselves à the Eleventh Corps à fought reasonably well at Chancellorsville (72). The evidence for this is found in the official and unofficial accounts of the battle and in the careful way that Keller sifts the varieties of perspectives that emerged after the battle. Keller demonstrates the many of the Anglo soldiers that fought on the Union right treated German soldiers with respect and blamed the high command for the failure to anticipate Jackson's attack. Anglo soldiers farther removed from the scene were quicker to pin blame on the damn Dutch and newspapermen endorsed with relish the image of panicked Germans fleeing the Confederate advance. Keller charts here the resurgence of a wartime nativism that Germans did not fail to miss. Immediately after the battle, German newspapers and leaders began defending the troops' performance against the charges brought by Anglos. This dialectic continued throughout the war and beyond, leaving many Germans feeling betrayed and alienated from an America for which their sons, fathers, and husbands were giving their lives. To paint this picture, which Keller does convincingly and in graceful prose, he makes effective use of a wide variety of German-language newspapers from all across the North. Civil War scholars rarely stray beyond English-language sources, but Keller demonstrates the value for those who do.

The performance of German soldiers at Gettysburg partially alleviates the stigma of cowardice fastened on them after Chancellorsville, but the damage had already been done. As Keller persuasively argues, German immigrants claimed the rights of citizenship by virtue of their military service but had little desire to be Americans in a cultural sense. He clearly refutes the standing historiographical interpretation, that the war provided a way to Americanize immigrants. In this sense, Keller's book also counters the established argument that the Civil War helped consolidate American identity. Forthcoming studies of the Irish and other immigrant communities will help us refine this picture, but it

may that in terms of ethnicity, the Civil War exerted more centripetal than centrifugal power. Keller carries the story into the post-war years, as Carl Schurz and other defenders of the cause carefully rebutted attempts to ascribe blame to German troops at Chancellorsville. Here, Keller makes an important contribution to the growing study of Civil War memory. By clearly chronicling the sequence of arguments about the battle, Keller shows exactly how and why memories clash and what the consequences of those later battles were. Keller's finely-crafted study offers a wealth of insights into the Civil War and should enjoy a wide readership among students of the period.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean is an associate professor of history at the University of North Florida. He is author of Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia.