

### German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconstruction, 1830- 1877

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## Review

David T. Dixon

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**Garrison, Zachary Stuart.** *German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconstruction, 1830–1877*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2020. SOFTCOVER. \$30.00 ISBN 9780809337552 pp. 232

Following in a tradition of regional studies of nineteenth century German Americans from historians like Kathleen Niels Conzen, Stanley Nadel, and Walter Kamphoefner comes this ambitious effort from a new scholar in the field. Zachary Garrison counts Lee Ann Whites and Christopher Phillips among his mentors, so it is no surprise that his first book is well organized, convincingly argued, and clearly written.

Garrison explains how German immigrants translated liberal nationalist ideology from the failed revolutions in their homeland into a pragmatic politics when confronted with issues of sectional conflict, slavery, free soil, and free labor. Some of their core beliefs, especially their widespread and consistent opposition to slavery, situated them at loggerheads with their neighbors and a Democratic Party that traditionally supported immigrants. Although liberal positions inhibited their cultural assimilation, such politics enabled them to take leadership roles in the new Republican Party of the 1850s. German Americans ultimately became the most enthusiastic and uncompromising Unionists in the land, demonstrating their fidelity to their adopted country by enlisting early and in droves when Lincoln called for volunteer soldiers in the spring of 1861. The setting of his study, the Middle Border, is the region around the confluence of the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi. It rests along a sectional boundary that was geographically and culturally permeable while becoming increasingly hardened politically, is crucial to both Garrison's analysis and his argument. German Americans on Garrison's Middle Border lived, worked, and debated at the very nexus of the widening ideological gap that culminated in the American Civil War.

One of the strengths of Garrison's work is his ability to explain how an immigrant minority group deftly adapted their tactics over time in a diverse and dynamic polity. He centers German liberal nationalism in the tradition of *Bildung*, a commitment to self-development that strives to unite a society of individuals through intellectual and moral education. Achieving an ideal liberal nation requires a government that guarantees individual freedoms, universal human rights, and popular rule. Nineteenth-century German immigrants felt a duty to pursue and promote *Bildung* in their new country to help the America fulfill its Revolutionary promises and realize its destiny as the model republic of the world. Ending slavery, that discordant note in the Declaration of Independence's political symphony of liberty, topped the list of necessary reforms.

Even if liberal Germans on the Middle Border detested slavery in their hearts, their heads told them that radical stances like immediate abolition and racial equality were impractical, given the widespread acceptance of white supremacy and the economic and cultural ties that bound border free and slave states together. Garrison describes how early nineteenth-century German immigrants called Dreissigers muted their antislavery beliefs to focus on more practical concerns like land acquisition while they built communities and gradually gained influence in local and state governments.

Dreissiger immigrants like Gustav Körner shine as heroes in Garrison's narrative. He is correct in spotlighting Dreissigers' efforts to seed German liberalism in their adopted land. Scholars of the nineteenth century German-American experience have focused mainly on radical Forty-Eighter leaders and neglected their pioneer predecessors, whose moderate liberalism represented the majority position. But in his zeal to rescue the Dreissigers from historical obscurity on page 41, Garrison needlessly caricatures important and influential Forty-Eighters as "loud and outlandish" displaying "idealism mixed with pompous ignorance." He dismisses their contributions to the radical turn in American politics in the 1850s and 1860s as "a sensationalized rendering of German-American liberalism." They were far more than that.

Garrison claims on page 5 that when the sectional crisis came to a head, "a dominant liberal discourse emerged" that caused disparate polities of Germans to coalesce behind an antislavery agenda. He is certainly right about the timing, but wrong in denying agency to a diverse, transnational coalition of abolitionists with a broad conception of liberty and universal

human rights. As Manisha Sinha points out in *The Slave's Cause*, the international abolition movement was intertwined with the plight of Native Americans, labor, and immigrants, conflating emancipation with free labor and critical of capitalism. The vast majority of Germans, as Garrison correctly points out, did not emigrate for political reasons; yet their status near the bottom of the emerging industrial workforce and the nativism designed to keep them there politicized them in America. Folk heroes of 1848 like Friedrich Hecker, Franz Sigel, Carl Schurz, and August Willich exercised tremendous influence on great masses of recent immigrants through labor organizing, electioneering, and recruiting volunteer soldiers for the Union Army. It might even be posited that Forty-Eighters reawakened radical impulses that the Dreissigers had held deep in their hearts since their own days as revolutionaries.

Garrison devotes little attention to religion in his narrative; yet the political gap between conservative German Catholics and liberally inclined Lutherans, for example, had a large bearing on party affiliation. Enter the Forty-Eighter leaders, many of whom were freethinkers, humanists, and atheists, and a complex picture of the religious divisions in the German American community emerges. *Bildung* was not the exclusive province of liberals like the Dreissigers. Radical socialist philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach constructed their own interpretation of *Bildung* that renounced religion as antithetical to cultural and political progress and incompatible with a democratic republic.

Garrison's most convincing chapter begins on page 132 as he chronicles "the retreat of German liberalism" as Radical Reconstruction waned. Top scholars like Alison Clark Efford and Mischa Honeck agree that even the most radical German-American abolitionists abandoned their tenuous advocacy of black equality and full citizenship to focus on issues like resurgent nativism, labor rights, temperance, national unity and economic self-interest. As Germans on the Middle Border returned to moderation and some to the Democratic Party, they lost the outsized political influence they had enjoyed during the secession crisis and wartime. Garrison misses an opportunity to reinforce his thesis on the strength of ethnic nationalism by ignoring the impact that unification had on German American leaders in the early 1870s. Efford demonstrates clearly that enthusiasm for German unification distracted German Americans from their focus on black welfare and reinforced the idea that the battles for freedom and citizenship for black males had already been won on the battlefield and enshrined in the Constitution.

As a thoughtful and nuanced examination of the political evolution of German immigrants in a particular region, Garrison's work has few equals. His research is sound and his focus consistent. Missouri and St. Louis tend to overshadow other states and large towns in his study, though it is hard to argue with their relative importance. His arguments could be strengthened by more comparisons outside his study area. Was the Middle Border exceptional or did similar patterns of political alignment and realignment occur in Milwaukee, Chicago, Baltimore, New York and other areas where large numbers of German immigrants settled?

It is disappointing to see important scholarship consigned to a third-rate production package. The inadequate index, paucity of illustrations, amateurish hand drawn map, and substandard paper detract from Garrison's sophisticated and engaging study.

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