

Liberty and Slavery: European Separatists, Southern Secession, and the American Civil War

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Review

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Eichhorn, Niels. *Liberty and Slavery: European Separatists, Southern Secession, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019). Hardcover. ISBN 9780807171677. pp. 220. \$45.00

Among the Civil War subfields that remain relatively underexplored is trans-Atlantic influences. Niels Eichhorn, an assistant professor at Middle Georgia State University, makes a fine contribution to that subfield with his book *Liberty and Slavery*, wherein he explores the relationship between southern secessionism and European separatism. He compares the separatist movements against brutal subjection by Poles from Russia, Irish Catholics from Britain, Hungarians from Austria, Germans from Denmark in 1830 or 1848 with the southern slave state secession to form the Confederate States of America in 1861

Secessionists believed that the states were sovereign, had voluntarily joined the confederacy called the United States, and retained the right to secede whenever they so desired. Before the Civil War, John Calhoun was the most articulate secessionist. He had been a congressional representative then a senator, secretary of war, secretary of state, and vice president. His fierce loyalty was to his home state of South Carolina. He insisted that states' rights included nullification or rejecting any United States laws that conflicted with their respective interests.

Southern secessionists partly justified their rebellion by comparing themselves to European separatists of the previous generation. If Europe's separatists inspired southern secessionists, the feeling was rarely mutual. Most Europeans were appalled by the slavocracy established by the Confederacy. Nearly all those who migrated to the United States and joined the war did so in a Union rather than a rebel regiment. That prompted rage and resentment among secessionists. Emeric Szabad was a former Hungarian revolutionary who fought for the United States and was captured by Confederate pickets in October 1863. Szabad wrote in his diary that the rebel captain "found it incomprehensible how a Hungarian could fight with the d—d Yankees against the Southern people who were fighting for what Hungarians had fought for in 1848." It is not clear

whether Szabad explained that the southern cause of slavocracy was utterly abhorrent and contrary to the ideals of Hungarian independence. However, Daniel O’Connell, the Irish Catholic leader, spoke for countless European secessionists when he declared that “of all men living, an American citizen who is the owner of slaves is the most despicable [as] traitors to the cause of human liberty and foul detractors of the democratic principle.”

If this book has a weakness, it is not delving into the psychology of the pervasive slavocrat delusions and hypocrisies about their cause like that of the captain who captured Szabad. Secessionists genuinely believed that the northern states subjected them, pointing to Whig and Republican opposition to slavery’s spread to the western territories, although neither party advocated abolition. In doing so, slavocrats projected their own vilest values and behavior--slaveholding—onto some hated other, northerners, especially abolitionists. They insisted that slavery was Biblically and naturally correct, that slavery uplifted and liberated rather than suppressed and exploited their black chattel. Slavocrats zealously believed in their right of secession but denied it to Unionists in their states who wanted to secede from them and remain Americans as in western Virginia, eastern Tennessee, northern Alabama, and other mountainous regions with few slaves. Thus did power trump principle.

A few former European separatists did fight for the rebels, most notably brilliant general Patrick Cleburne. In January 1864, Cleburne exposed the irony of the rebel cause when he proposed enlisting slaves in return for granting them freedom. In other words, Cleburne called for partially giving up slavery to win a war for secession that the rebels began in paranoia that northern abolitionists would eventually force them to give up slavery. The idea of transforming slaves into free and armed men terrified and appalled virtually all slavocrats. They went down fighting for their cause to the bitter end. *Liberty and Slavery* provides an interesting, thought-provoking exploration of a lesser-known dimension of the Civil War.

William Nester is a professor of Government and Politics at St. John’s University. His latest book is *The Old West’s First Power Couples: The Fremonts, the Custers, and Their Epic Quest for Manifest Destiny*.