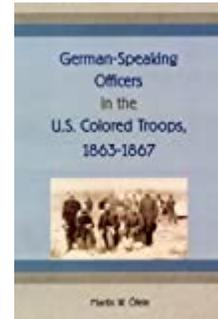




Martin W. Oefe. *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863-1867.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xviii + 320 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2692-3.



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German-Americans in the Civil War

Martin W. Oefe's book is the result of vast and meticulous research. Oefe has analyzed not only an impressive array of secondary literature, he also draws on a number of primary sources, some of which have received little or no attention until recently. One of the first things his readers will notice immediately is the bibliography, which is truly exemplary, and which encompasses both the wide fields of German immigrants in the United States as well as Civil War history.

Oefe's intention is clearly not an overview of the Civil War; rather, he considers a very particular aspect of it. Readers of the book must, therefore, possess a thorough understanding of the conflict. His interpretation of the Emancipation Proclamation, although within the mainstream of professional consensus today, may be seen by some as controversial. According to Oefe, early attempts at liberating slaves during the Civil War, such as Fremont's proclamation of August 1861, which was immediately repealed by the President, were "a means of hurting the rebellion economically" (p. 13). However, he seems to see a different motivation behind Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, although it, too, follows in

the same footsteps. Regardless, the concept of emancipating an enemy's slaves was in no way new, and already had an American precedent. Lord Dunmore made a similar proclamation on behalf of the British during the American War of Independence, a document oft overlooked in U.S.-American historiography.

The ideal reader of this work should already have a general familiarity with the history of German emigration during the nineteenth century and with the environment in which German-Americans found themselves, but the informed reader can gain a great deal from the book. Oefe recognizes that German-Americans were a heterogeneous group, and that this phenomenon became even more multifaceted with the arrival of the so-called Forty-Eighters: "With their varying backgrounds, the Forty-Eighters added a colorful element to the existing heterogeneity of German-Americans who had always been split along political, social, and—not the least—denominational lines. Their variance set Germans apart from all other groups of immigrants, preventing them from developing a common historical tradition as well as from assimilating into society as *the* German-Americans" (p. 5).

A look at the book's table of contents illustrates this heterogeneity. The flow of ideas is consistent and follows a logical pattern. The first section of the book deals with the immigrants as such, and summarizes their origins, identities, reasons for leaving home and locations of primary settlement in the United States. This part is fairly short, as Åfele can rely on many other works covering similar ground. Naturally Åfele was not able to reconstruct every single step for each one of these individuals, but he starts in Europe with their family background and education, lists their reasons for leaving and describes their various careers in the United States prior to and after entering the service as well as their fate after the end of the war. However, it is not absolutely clear how Åfele defines German-speakers. Due to the nature of German states, in which German-speaking minorities existed in non-German states and non-German speaking groups lived in German-dominated states (such as Austria or Prussia), historians are confronted with a multicultural hodgepodge that is somewhat confusing. Åfele's approach is very inclusive—he feels that Hungarian freedom fighters who were refugees from Austria should be included in his survey. Moreover, it is not always clear why from his analysis why any one individual's fate should be representative for a larger group. When Åfele details emigrants' reasons for leaving their homelands, it is individuals we are looking at, not a homogeneous group. This emphasis on detail is fascinating and immensely valuable to students and scholars of German-American history, but the results from the survey are too varied to make generic assumptions or to arrive at general conclusions about the group that is at the core of the book.

The second section is central to the author's argument. Here Åfele considers the reasons his subjects might have had for fighting for the Union, their reasons for joining the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), their leadership experiences and USCT encounters with Confederate troops. My initial impression, after reading both John David Smith's foreword and Åfele's own introduction, was that the central question might start with the question of why individuals sought commissions with the USCT and then move to an analysis of general patterns that would apply to the group as a whole.

Clearly, most immigrants enlisted not for idealistic reasons (only 10 percent did so), but because of economic hardship. Åfele quotes Wolfgang Helbich to prove this point (p. 16). As Åfele states, "German-Americans had internalized the existing racist conceptions about societal hierarchies and had to establish their position within that

society as distinctly above that of African-Americans" (p. 28). Passages from newspapers, such as St. Louis's *Neue Anzeiger des Westens* illustrate this point (p. 26). It is therefore hardly surprising that many German-speaking USCT officers joined its ranks not because of ideals of racial equality but because of a number of very real advantages that came with the position: higher pay, the social recognition of being an officer rather than a regular soldier and better chances of surviving the war. Åfele does not consider here how the Union's strategy for the USCT influenced these factors. It is undoubtedly true that in any given military unit the commanding officers' risk of being wounded or killed is lower than that of the ordinary men. The question is whether the use the Union Army made of the USCT increased or decreased this risk. Were these troops used as cannon fodder? By and large, however, the reader gains tremendous insight into the conflicts that faced commissioned officers of the USCT under particular circumstances.

The German-speaking officers of the USCT were a group with one common denominator: the fact that their mother tongue was German. Apart from that they differed in all aspects, be it their political affiliation, their motivation or their future careers. Some ended up returning to Germany, others became "ethnic leaders" and even others assimilated into the proverbial melting pot. The pressure of this melting pot in turn shaped the German-American collective memory of the Civil War, the subject of the author's third section. Åfele observes: "New waves of southern and eastern European immigrants ... prompted unease among older Americans. Resulting social tensions and resurfacing nativism not only hit these newcomers but also affected ethnic groups already in the country.... The increasing equation of Americanness with whiteness made it a key factor in ethnic minorities' assimilation endeavors to present themselves as unquestionable patriots and defenders of the Union" (p. 229). This nativist pressure bore some bizarre fruit, such as the inclusion of "immigrants who had fought for the Confederacy in a biographical appendix listing some five hundred notable German officers." Åfele concludes that "the reason for such historiographical flaws lay in the need for ethnic integration. For the sake of assimilation, ethnic public memory had to conform with generally accepted interpretations of the war" (p. 231). Given this premise, the existence of popular legends such as the Myth of 1860 is hardly surprising. We observe a similar glorification of the German-American contribution to the patriots' victory in the American War of Independence, when German-Americans had to fight stereotypes

caused by the British army's use of German troops, or "Hessians."

Linguistically, it is hardly evident that the book's author was not writing in his mother tongue. In fact, when Åfele interprets a passage written by Captain Johann C. Hackheiser, it appears he could have benefited from more awareness of German expressions and syntax. Hackheiser expressed his hope "that we all bee in Richmond by the Fourth of July. I would like to bee ther on that day, to take a Nationenall dinner in the Capitol City of the Rebles" (p. 69.) While Åfele assumes that Hackheiser is referring to the actual capitol building, I would venture the guess that he meant "capital" (*Hauptstadt*).

Åfele's constant awareness of the effects of an individual's actions on ethnic collective memory is the great-

est strength of this book. True to the motto "the winner takes it all," the German-American contribution to the Union war effort ensured the group's success in the United States after the war, and guaranteed the visibility of the German element in American society. However, the individuals who caught the author's attention are treated as a kind of case study without ever becoming truly representative for their ethnic group. The relatively small number of German-speaking officers in the USCT—only 265—is one reason why it is hard to arrive at conclusions. Nonetheless, the book is a welcome addition to the body of work concentrating on the Civil War, especially on the USCT during the conflict, and the German-American experience during that era. Further research placing the German-speaking USCT officers in a comparative context would indeed be very interesting.

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