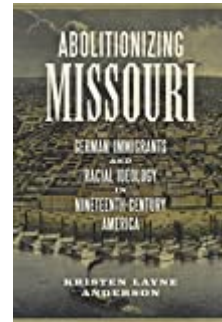


Kristen Layne Anderson. *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-6196-8.



Reviewed by Brent O. Peterson (Lawrence University)

Published on H-Nationalism (December, 2016)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Centre for Advanced Study)

The standard narrative of German Americans and the American Civil War insists not only that German immigrants were the most stalwart supporters of the Union cause, but also that, led by the radical democratic refugees of the Revolution of 1848, German Americans were staunch abolitionists, uncompromising opponents of slavery, and strong supporters of full civil rights for freed slaves. It should scarcely be surprising that the historical reality was a good deal more complicated; that, for example, a good many German-Americans looked out for themselves first and, as a result, shifted their views on emancipation as that cause enhanced or threatened the interests of German immigrants. Indeed, nuance and self-interest should be what we expect, even in the face of a long tradition of filiopietistic exaggerations of German American contributions and achievements, but until the appearance of Kristin Layne Anderson's *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America*, myth has all too frequently trampled over the facts of the matter.

After setting up the book's overall narrative arc, Anderson devotes two chapters to German American attitudes before the war, breaking her account at the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which upended the Missouri Compromise and opened the door for slav-

ery to spread further into the western territories. She devotes another two chapters to the Civil War itself, and she focuses almost exclusively on the politics of the conflict, particularly on the question of emancipation, rather than on who among the German Americans fought when and where. The final two chapters deal with the dilemma of just what rights freed slaves would receive once the war was over and Reconstruction had begun. Her overarching conclusion is that as German American interests changed, that is, as German-Americans became aware of just how slavery and then emancipation could impact the larger society rather than just the enslaved and then freed population, so too did they shift their views on how African Americans should be treated. It turns out, and again this should not be surprising, that a substantial number of German Americans regarded freedom as a zero-sum game in which rights granted to others might diminish their own position, at which point various racist arguments were used to argue against universal suffrage, free public education, and a host of other rights.

A few specifics will have to suffice as examples of how deeply Anderson dives into the details of German Americans' responses to abolition. The book is very clearly written and relatively short (not quite two hundred pages of text), so it would be easy for readers to ac-

quaint themselves with the full account. For many readers, the book gets off to a surprising start: "in the 1840s and 1850s Missouri Germans were not uniformly, or even strongly, antislavery" (p.19). Like most whites, Germans apparently believed in some sort of hierarchy of races, but the Germans who migrated to Missouri also seemed to believe they could avoid the issue because, compared to the Deep South, the state had relatively few slaves. After 1854, they faced the prospect of slavery spreading to the new territories making them less attractive to migrants, and since slavery also threatened the livelihood of free laborers, Germans tended to question the institution or, at least, they feared and opposed its expansion. While German Americans overwhelmingly supported the Union during the Civil War and participated at levels far higher than might have been expected from their numbers, like other whites, even those Germans who "volunteered to serve with black regiments [did so] for many reasons, but the desire to be an officer was often greater than any commitment to African American rights" (p. 127). Again, self-interest seems to have been their chief motivating force.

That same political calculation seems to have strengthened conservative forces in the German American community following the war's conclusion. Their fear was that Radical Republicans' underlying Puritanism threatened the German tradition of spending Sabbaths in a beer garden, while during the week it meant public schools might continue to be dominated by Anglo-Protestant Bible reading, a practice that was opposed by German Catholics, what would become the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and a substantial number of freethinkers. Seen in this light, the idea of voting rights for former slaves could well have undermined deeply held convictions within the German community of Missouri. Some even wondered if nativist rumblings might portend a curtailment of immigrant rights. The result, as Anderson argues, was that some German Americans "adopted many of the racial prejudices that were widespread among other white Americans and that they perceived a qualitative difference between German immigrants—who as whites were inherently qualified to be full citizens—and African Americans who were not" (p. 183). In short, Missouri's German community bore only passing resemblance to the heroic antislavery activists that frequently still populate history books.

Unfortunately, for a work that claims to describe the views of all of Missouri's German immigrants the documentary basis is both exhaustive and relatively thin. On the one hand, Anderson has worked through much of the enormous archive of German-language newspapers published in St. Louis in the decades surrounding the Civil War, and she also includes ward by ward analysis of several elections in an effort to see how the St. Louis German population voted. According to the bibliography, she has also consulted any number of family papers. On the other hand, the bulk of what she quotes and analyzes are reports from newspapers regarding political questions, which is far from everything that they published; the material is also skewed strongly towards the residents of St. Louis. There might not have been many alternatives, but, as someone who once came at similar questions from the literary side of things, I would have appreciated a look at the rest of the papers and some deeper drilling into longer passages from the press. I would even have liked to get a flavor of the German originals, at least in the endnotes, but that may be more than publishers are willing to do these days.

The book also comes up somewhat short on the analysis of its theoretical underpinnings. I suppose we could posit some definition of the "racial ideology" in the book's subtitle, but it only rarely surfaces as an object of specific inquiry in the course of the text. One illustration from the conclusion will have to serve as an example of what seems to be missing. Speaking generally, Anderson writes, "These immigrants had not assimilated into American society in a cultural sense and had no desire to do so" (p. 195). This is an amazingly broad statement that seems to rest on just the sort of received knowledge about German Americans that the book seeks to undercut. However, the book's final paragraph begins as follows, "Ultimately, the majority of Germans in St. Louis cast their lot with the white native-born Americans, rejecting the forty-eighters' rhetoric of equality" (p.198). Here, the argument is once again differentiated, but it might be worth asking if the implied "racial ideology" in this quotation is not a sign of precisely the sort of assimilation that was supposed to be missing at the outset of the conclusion. Those quibbles aside, anyone wanting a much fuller account of just how difficult it was for German Americans to deal with the issue of slavery in their new homeland would be well advised to seek out Anderson's book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Brent O. Peterson. Review of Anderson, Kristen Layne, *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46857>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.