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Review of "Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory" by Christian B. Keller

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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Christian B. Keller. *Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. xii + 222 pp. Table of contents, introduction, notes, bibliography, index, maps, drawings, photographs, and prints.

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In Defense of German Americans at the Battle of Chancellorsville

For those unfamiliar with the performance of German-speaking Union soldiers at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, Christian B. Keller's latest book sets the record straight. In popular memory, this U.S. Civil War battle in the Virginia wilderness is remembered by many as Robert E. Lee's greatest triumph and the conflict that led to the mortal wounding of Confederate General "Stonewall" Jackson. The attack and rout of the Union Eleventh Corps by Jackson's flanking columns led to some of the strongest nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment since the rise of the Know Nothing Party in the previous decade. Over half of the corps' twelve thousand men were German-born or of direct German lineage. Drawing on various sources, Keller analyzes the performance of the Union's German regiments and explores the impact of nativism on Anglo-American and German-American reactions to the battle. Keller's study fills a glaring gap in the literature about the performance of the German-speaking Union soldiers in the Battle of Chancellorsville and makes several important contributions to German-American studies and Civil War research.

The book is divided into seven chapters that support the author's various goals. In his introduction, Keller notes that he hopes to create a greater understanding of the Germans' performance in the battle of Chancellorsville, to examine the accuracy of the subsequent Anglo-American criticism, and "to document the German American reactions to that criticism and how it affected the Germans' thinking and behavior later in the war, and even in the postwar period" (p. 6). Keller further seeks to determine whether the Civil War helped to assimilate German-born immigrants. Although Keller's notes are relegated to the back of the book, many of them provide interesting details about the individuals involved. Readers will find themselves turning often to the "Notes" section.

In Chapter 1, Keller deals with German Americans and the outbreak of the war. He discusses the "Know Nothing" or "American" party, a powerful impulse in American society. In response to its threat to their rights, German-born immigrants struggled to define themselves as an ethnic group. Once the war began, Germans enlisted in both the Union's ethnic and non-ethnic regiments and participated heavily in many early battles, especially in the West. Home front support and a growing sense of unity among the northern German communities were strong as German Americans interpreted the war through the eyes of ethnic soldiers and military leaders. Evidence for German ethnicity in the Union Army before Chancellorsville (1861-62) is the subject of chapter 2. While field activities of German-American regiments were similar to those of American regiments, officers communicated in German with their men, who were older than the average eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old enlistee. Germans enlisted for a variety of reasons, but steady income and a desire to prove their loyalty to their adopted fatherland were at the top of the list. German regiments also distinguished themselves through a good supply of beer in the war's early days as well as through consumption of German foods such as potatoes, sausages, cabbage, and cheese. They celebrated German-only holidays and were known to sing in camp, on the march, and even on their way to battle.

Chapter 3 discusses the German-American regiments of the newly formed Union Eleventh Corps and the circumstances they found themselves in before and during the battle of Chancellorsville. Both German and non-German soldiers were left unsettled by the change in command from Major General Franz Sigel to an Anglo-American commander, General Oliver Otis Howard. Keller reconstructs the battle and shows how superiors dismissed warnings of imminent attack by numerous German-American officers and scouts. Surprised,

outnumbered, overwhelmed, and in a poor tactical situation, the Eleventh Corps became isolated from the rest of the army and lost its infantry reserve. Under attack, the Eleventh Corps broke and retreated, but as Keller points out, casualty reports show that the Germans had indeed stood and fought.

In Chapter 4, Keller discusses initial Anglo-American reaction to the Union defeat and the perceived panic of the German regiments as portrayed in the English-language press. Anglo-American soldiers blamed "cowardly" Germans and succumbed to name-calling and scapegoating, while the officers responsible for the failed campaign escaped public scrutiny. Although the English-language press later tried to modify its portrayals of German cowardice, German morale and enthusiasm for the Union cause had irreparably suffered. Chapter 5 further examines the controversy and the German reaction to Anglo allegations. While German-American soldiers dealt with disbelief, sadness, and helplessness, the German-language press quickly defended their courage. In some instances, German publications criticized American society and suggested that Germans were better off remaining German. In Chapter 6, Keller discusses nativism and German ethnicity after the battle. In response to the nativist backlash after Chancellorsville, German Americans rallied in defense of the troops accused of cowardice, holding mass meetings to attempt to unite against anti-German prejudice. Though the Eleventh Corps was dissolved in the fall of 1863, German-American soldiers continued to be haunted by the controversy.

One of Keller's goals is to explore and document German-American reactions to Anglo-American criticism and challenge the claims of historians who maintained that the Civil War aided the assimilation of German-born immigrants who fought in it.[1] In contrast, Keller argues that the German-American regiments from Pennsylvania continued to be led by Germans late into the war and retained a strong German character until the very end. In other words, they did not lose their ethnic identity. Keller's final chapter discusses Chancellorsville and the Civil War in German-American memory, pointing to the ways that memory of the war heightened German-American ethnic consciousness instead. Here, he makes reference to a growing scholarship demonstrating that German America between 1870 and 1914 assumed a "culturally pluralistic" appearance, and that German Americans celebrated their ethnicity and stressed the benefits of remaining German.

The work makes several contributions. The first of these is the information Keller provides readers about the significant role German-born Union soldiers played during the American Civil War. Information is drawn from his research in untapped English- and German-language primary sources such as newspapers, soldiers' letters, memoirs, and postwar veterans' serials. These include national and state archival materials such as papers, diaries, letters, and regimental books and rosters, privately owned materials, and English and German-language newspapers from Pennsylvania and New York. Keller acknowledges the eastern bias in his research and conclusions; as he observes, the German regiments in the Eleventh Corps primarily hailed from New York and Pennsylvania, and the majority of German Americans living in the United States at the time resided in the East. He did, however, as he states, endeavor to include as much commentary as possible about German-speaking soldiers from western states, "because no general observations can be made about all northern Germans without considering the large ethnic populations living west of the Appalachians" (p. 7).

A second contribution of the work lies in its highlighting of German Americans' vigilance/valor, sense of duty, patriotism and courage under fire, both in the field and on the home front of their adopted fatherland. For military historians and Civil War buffs already familiar with the battle, this book will correct misinformation and nativist-based accusations made against the German Americans in the Union Eleventh Corps. This task is necessary and important, since Germans were collectively the largest single ethnic group in Federal service.[2] Keller's book deepens our understanding of their sacrifice in the Battle of Chancellorsville.

A third contribution lies in the questions that Keller's research raises about German Americans who served. Keller is critical of the shortcomings of earlier, now dated, works on German Americans in the war. His concerns include problems ranging from stereotypes, errors of fact, overgeneralizations, and reliance on secondary sources, among others. His access to sources has enabled him to challenge the "melting pot" thesis prevalent in those earlier works. He shows convincingly that German immigrants decided to Americanize slowly and on their own terms, partially as a result of their experiences with nativism during the war. Keller's exhaustive study succeeds in illuminating how nativist tendencies shaped their ethnic identity before, during, and after the war, and how their

perceived battlefield performance and the corresponding backlash led to a more cautious assimilation into American life.

Noting two minor problems with the book should not distract from these successes. Two aspects of Keller's discussion are lacking. First, in the introduction, Keller defines the term "German American" or "German" to mean a person born in any nineteenth-century German state, or their immediate offspring then living in the United States. Beginning in Chapter 2, however, Keller introduces the terms "Dutch" and/or "Dutchmen"; these references continue throughout the work. While this misnomer was common at the time and persists to this day, it would have been helpful had Keller offered a brief explanation about the connection between the descriptors "German" and "Dutch." In the "Notes" section of Chapter 3, he explains that when using the term "Pennsylvania German," he is referring to all German-speaking regiments from Pennsylvania, not simply those composed of Pennsylvania Dutch troops, and that the reader should consult the first chapter of a previously published book for a detailed explanation of the difference between "German Americans" and "Pennsylvania Dutch" (who are also frequently called "Pennsylvania Germans"). However, for twenty-first-century readers, particularly those unfamiliar with nineteenth-century Pennsylvania and/or the Pennsylvania Dutch, a summary of this detailed explanation should have been included to minimize confusion. For some readers, the term might conjure modern ideas about Old Order Amish and Mennonites, who are passivists and conscientious objectors.

Secondly, in the last three pages of his book, Keller begins a discussion about possible modern echoes of the prejudice suffered by the Germans in the Civil War era. He offers historical comparisons, such as the reaction against Muslim Americans after September 11, 2001, and the treatment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor. This questionable commentary entails only a few pages, but it prevents the work from leaving a more powerful impression about the focus of his research.

The sources Keller uses and the book in general will provide future researchers with a solid foundation for further work on other German Americans (men and women) participating in the Civil War, such as those serving in the Navy, in the Confederate Army, in other theaters of the war, those serving from western states and/or on the home front, and the nuanced differences in their class/rank, political and religious affiliations, experiences, and ultimate assimilation in America.

Notes

[1]. Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns in American Nativism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955); William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

[2]. Keller notes that historians have disputed the actual numbers of German-born soldiers enlisted in the Union armies; estimates range from 187,000 to 216,000. He adds that this number does not include the sons of original immigrants who should be included in the total of ethnic German troops.

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