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### Friedrich Hecker and Carl Schurz

In 1929, in his justly renowned study, *The Americanization of Carl Schurz*, Chester Verne Easum considered the possibility that the German revolutionary Friedrich Hecker may have influenced Schurz to become a Republican. In describing the meeting between Schurz and Hecker near Belleville, Illinois, in October 1854, he mentioned their mutual pledge "to meet on the old field in a common endeavor" if the antislavery movement should ever need such service. Stressing the fact that Hecker had been an ardent Republican from the beginning, Easum wrote, "it is not impossible that the older man's influence may have counted toward the younger's decision also to cast his lot with the Republicans."<sup>1</sup> Ten years later, Rudolf Baumgardt, in his biography of Carl Schurz, not only repeated this speculation but carried it further. Again detailing the meeting between the two German-Americans and adding unsubstantiated conversation, he attributed the following words to Hecker:

Is Schurz a member of the Republican party? No? He must join. It is the solution of the future, its program timely with a protective tariff to benefit factories, measures to build up traffic spanning the country's great distances, [and] congressional supervision of Negro slavery in the territories.

According to the author, Hecker then spoke about the history of the German antislavery movement in America, about Franz Daniel Pastorius, the Salzburg settlers in Georgia, and Professor Carl Follen in Boston who lost his life on a burning ship. "The reasoning in Hecker's talk enchants the listener," Baumgardt insisted, concluding his story with this climax:

It is a magic hour. For right then and there Schurz is taken in by Hecker's demoniacal power and thus by the Republican party. His path in this direction may already have been laid out; nearly driven instinctively by aversion to Douglas and thus to the Democrats and intellectually by objective reflection; yet that had only been a feeling,

not a very clear one, or based on reason and therefore devoid of fervor, but that evening Hecker's ardent enthusiasm has a magic effect upon a receptive mind.<sup>2</sup>

These are strong words and interesting surmises. But whether there is any real foundation for them, whether they correspond to the facts, is another question. It deserves an answer.

Friedrich Hecker was a well-known German radical. Born in 1811 in Eichtersheim in Baden, the son of distinguished parents—his father served as court counselor to Prince Primate Carl von Dalberg—he studied law at Heidelberg and Munich. After a visit to Paris in 1835, he settled in Mannheim, where he established a flourishing practice. In 1842 he was elected to the second chamber of the legislature of Baden and made a name for himself as the leader of the liberal movement and an opponent of the incorporation of Schleswig-Holstein by Denmark. On a visit to Berlin he was expelled from Prussia and later took a lead in the Offenburg convention of 1847. In the Revolution of 1848, he sought to sway the pre-parliament at Frankfurt in favor of a liberal republic; when this effort resulted in failure, he went to southern Baden to raise an army and establish his republic. Defeated by the combined armies of various German states, he fled to Switzerland and eventually to America, where he settled near Belleville, Illinois, to become a "Latin farmer." A colonel in the Civil War, he was supportive of Republican politics until the founding of the Liberal Republican party, which he joined. His devotion to Republican ideals was beyond question, and his fame as a revolutionary preceded him in his new country.<sup>3</sup>

Carl Schurz was the most famous German-American of the nineteenth century. Born in Liblar near Cologne in 1829, the son of a schoolmaster and the daughter of the local *Burghalfen*, or farmer-tenant, he was educated at a Catholic *Gymnasium* in Cologne and at the University of Bonn, where he fell under the influence of his German professor, Gottfried Kinkel. With him Schurz joined the most radical democratic republican faction during the Revolution of 1848 and then served in the revolutionary army in the Palatinate. Almost captured when the Prussians took the fortress of Rastatt, he managed to escape through a sewer and eventually reach French soil across the Rhine. He returned to Germany incognito to rescue his professor, then condemned to a life sentence in the penitentiary at Spandau near Berlin. This effort was successful; after bribing a prison guard, Schurz arranged for Kinkel to be lowered from the prison's roof by means of a rope and spirited him away to Mecklenburg and from there to Scotland, a feat that made Schurz famous. After marrying a wealthy Hamburg heiress, he emigrated to the United States in 1852 and finally settled in Watertown, Wisconsin, where he became a leader of German Republicans. He was nominated for lieutenant governor of Wisconsin in 1857, before he had even taken out his final citizenship papers, and was active in the election of 1860. Earning the gratitude of the



Republican party and of the administration of Abraham Lincoln, he was appointed minister to Spain but returned to join the army in 1862 as a brigadier general. He saw action at Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the battles around Chattanooga, rising to the rank of major general. He used his oratorical powers in support of Lincoln in the election of 1864 and ended his military career as chief of staff of General Henry W. Slocum's Army of Georgia.

After the war, Schurz returned to his newspaper work. He undertook a trip through the Southern states for President Andrew Johnson, but, because of his disapproval of the President's Reconstruction policies, fell out with the administration. His incisive report was printed by Congress and became a powerful radical campaign document. In 1867 he assumed the position of editor and part owner of the *Westliche Post*, a leading German paper in St. Louis. He was the keynote speaker at the 1868 Republican National Convention that nominated U. S. Grant for President, and in 1869 was elected United States Senator from Missouri. But, interested in civil service reform, reconciliation with the South, and resistance to the acquisition of the Dominican Republic, he broke with Grant and became one of the founders of the Liberal Republican party. He presided over its 1872 Cincinnati convention and was deeply disappointed at the nomination of Horace Greeley, whom, however, he loyally supported.

After rejoining the Republicans to campaign for Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, he was appointed Secretary of the Interior, a position he filled with distinction by introducing civil service rules, conservation measures, and a new Indian policy. In 1881 he moved to New York where he continued to be active in journalism. He also devoted himself to business, civil service reform, and opposition to imperialism. When he died in 1906, he had established an enviable record as an ethnic leader, a conservationist, a foe of slavery, and a reformer.<sup>4</sup>

What concrete evidence do we have to show that the conversion of Carl Schurz to Republicanism was influenced by Hecker? Are there any contemporary documents or does the Easum-Baumgardt speculation rest on nothing more than later recollections and surmise?

The main source for the story is found in Schurz's own *Reminiscences*, in which he described fully his visit to the old revolutionary. Because of its importance concerning this problem, the passage ought to be cited in its entirety. "Before leaving the vicinity of St. Louis," he wrote,

I visited the German revolutionary leader, Friedrich Hecker, on his prairie farm near Belleville in Illinois. I had never personally met him in Germany, but had heard much about his brilliant qualities and his fiery, impulsive nature. He had started a republican uprising in South Germany at an early stage of the revolutionary movement of 1848, which, although quickly overcome by military force, had



made him the hero of popular songs. His picture, representing him in a somewhat fantastic garb, was spread all over Germany, and as an exile he had become sort of a legendary hero. Being a man of much study and large acquirements, he was entitled to high rank among the "Latin farmers." His new home was a log-house of very primitive appearance. Mrs. Hecker, a woman of beauty and refinement, clad in the simple attire of a farmer's wife, plain but very tidy and tasteful, welcomed me at the door. "The Tiedemanns announced your coming," she said, "and we have been expecting you for several days. Hecker is ill with chills and fever and in very bad humor. But he wants to see you very much. If he uses peculiar language, do not mind it. It is his way when he is out of sorts." Mrs. Tiedemann, Hecker's sister in Philadelphia, had already told me of his tantrums. Thus cautioned, I entered the log-house and found myself in a large room very scantily and roughly furnished. Hecker was sitting on a low couch covered with a buffalo skin. "Hallo," he shouted in a husky voice. "Here you are at last. What in the world brought you into this accursed country?"

"Do you really think this country is so very bad?" I asked.

"Well—well, no!" he said. "It is not a bad country. It is good enough. But the devil take the chills and fever! Only look at me!" Then he rose to his feet and continued denouncing the chills and fever in the most violent terms.

Indeed, as he stood there, a man little over forty, he presented a rather pitiable figure. As a young lawyer at Mannheim and deputy in the legislative chamber of Baden, he had been noted for the elegance of his apparel, now he wore a gray woolen shirt, baggy and shabby trousers, and a pair of old carpet slippers. Mrs. Hecker, who noted my look of surprise, whispered to me with a sigh, "Since we have lived here I cannot make himself look decent." I had always heard that Hecker was a handsome man. And he might have been with his aquiline nose, his clear blue eyes, his finely chiseled features, and his blond hair and beard. But now that face looked haggard, sallow, and weary, and his frame, once so elastic, was drooping and hardly able to bear its own weight.

"Ah," said he, "you see what will become of an old revolutionary when he has to live on quinine pills." Then again he opened the vast resources of his vituperative eloquence on the malarian fever, calling it no end of opprobrious names. Gradually he quieted down, and we began to discuss the political situation. His wrath kindled again when speaking of slavery and the iniquitous attempt of Douglas to permit slavery unlimited expansion over the Territories. With all the fine enthusiasm of his noble nature he greeted the anti-slavery movement, then rising all over the North, as

the dawn of a new era, and we pledged ourselves mutually to meet on the field in a common endeavor if that great cause should ever call for our aid.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, all this was written some fifty years after the event. But at the time of his trip, he also described his visit to the old revolutionary in a letter to his wife. Only in this contemporary account, there was no mention of the pledge. "Between the first half of my letter and this," he reported on 5 October 1854,

comes my visit to Hecker. I reached him in the morning toward eleven and found him in a pitiable condition: countenance sunken and peaked, eyes languid, voice weak, skin yellow—parchment-like. I was affrightened to look upon him and still more to hear him. For four weeks he had not slept and was perpetually tossing back and forth with restlessness, though hardly master of his limbs. His illness is the so-called "congestive fever," which manifests itself in a sudden rush of blood to breast and head, the third recurrence of which is generally regarded as fatal. In addition he suffers from abdominal ailments. I believe one can arrive at the true ground of his illness by hearing him talk. His sanguine-choleric temperament throws him from one extreme to the other, often in the most contradictory manner. His recollections of the past constantly torture his spirit and drive him to combat through the hardest bodily exertions. He has become exceedingly nervous and permanently irritable. The violent, thoroughly foolish bodily exertions, the bitter rashness with which he exposes himself to the dangerous effects of the climate, have broken down his resistance, and the present distressing solitariness has confirmed him in the darkest possible views of life. When he complains, he accuses; when he censures, he damns outright. He feels old; believes it is no longer worth the trouble to live, and often wishes for rest merely to be at rest. . . . I sat sorrowfully by his bed and tried, by dint of the greatest efforts, to cheer him up. At last we got into the swing, and as I brought up matters about which he could talk with some satisfaction all went well. Finally both of us became lively and got to laughing. I did my utmost and we kept on talking till late in the evening. . . . I advised him to leave his farm and seek the benefits of a water cure. He was agreeable to the suggestion, but I fear as he comes to feel better he will not do it. He is being treated wholly according to the old methods and takes unbelievable quantities of medicine. I have done all I could to dissuade him from it, but with only apparent result. I had intended staying longer with him, but two-days' visit drove me forth, partly because I was deeply dispirited by what I heard and



saw, and could not wholly conceal it longer, partly because your letter was waiting for me in Chicago . . . .<sup>6</sup>

To compare this contemporary account with the corresponding passages in Baumgardt's book is disappointing. According to the German author, Hecker apparently sought to influence Schurz. In reality, however, it was Schurz who tried to influence Hecker. Judging by the letter, Baumgardt's assertions amount to pure speculation. The contemporary description of the visit in 1854 obviously differs markedly from that in the *Reminiscences*. Apparently, Schurz was so little impressed with the revolutionary's antislavery opinions that he did not even mention them.

In fact, at that period in his life, Schurz was not particularly taken in by Hecker. As he wrote to his old mentor Kinkel describing an election trip Hecker had just undertaken in the fall of 1856,

Hecker did not live up to general expectations. He spoke in New York, Philadelphia, and other Eastern cities. He was surrounded by others who spoke better . . . others who merely failed to surpass Hecker in the magic of his name.<sup>7</sup>

Later on, he thought better of the hothead from Baden, but he still had reservations. "He is just the same as ever," Schurz wrote to his wife after meeting Hecker in Belleville in July of 1860, an expression which can be taken either way, and seven years later in St. Louis, he still thought Hecker "is still the same: astonishes one occasionally with his abundant knowledge and keen mind, and then gives himself over to the wildest and craziest narrations."<sup>8</sup> It would seem evident from these quotes that Hecker's influence on Schurz, if it existed, was not very great. But when it came to antislavery, Schurz really did not require any urging to join the crusade. He was a foe of human bondage by instinct.

That love of liberty in Europe and hatred of slavery in the New World went hand in hand is not surprising. Carl Schurz, who had fought for democracy in the old country, came to America with a most positive attitude, so much so that his wife occasionally jested with him for finding "every shanty" in the New World charming. He discovered that democracy was working; its success showed how little government was actually needed for human happiness. But one shortcoming marred the favorable picture, and Schurz was not loath to admit it. As he put it, there "is [only] one shrill discord, and that is slavery in the South." He made this observation in a letter to his friend Charlotte Voss in October 1852, shortly after he arrived in the United States and long before he ever met Hecker. The problem upset him so that shortly afterward he explained to her that there was a party in America that called itself Democratic but was at the same time the mainstay of slavery!<sup>9</sup> When in his first years in America he met the abolitionist Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia,



the famous Quaker must have strengthened his antislavery convictions. Moreover, Kinkel, his friend and mentor, was a great admirer of the English foe of slavery William Wilberforce, so that antislavery ideas were second nature to Schurz.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that when the young German first came to the United States, like most immigrants, he was mindful of the Democrats' more positive attitude toward newcomers and therefore not hostile toward the Jacksonian party. In 1854 he traveled to Washington to see Congress in action; among the Senators he visited were several Democratic leaders, including James Shields of Illinois and Richard Brodhead of Pennsylvania, and he even talked with Stephen A. Douglas, whom he later despised. But then he was anxious to obtain American aid for the expected European revolution, and Douglas and his Young America promised to sustain liberals abroad, at least in a moral sense.<sup>11</sup>

This situation soon changed, however. It was while Schurz was in Washington that the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, repealing the time-honored Missouri Compromise and potentially opening the territories to slavery, was being debated, and its passage so shocked him that, like millions of others, he acquired an intense dislike for the grandiloquently named "Democracy."<sup>12</sup> To be sure, when in 1854 he came to Indianapolis on a business trip, he still entertained friendly relations with Democratic Governor Joseph A. Wright of Indiana, but by the time he reached Wisconsin, a state in which he was anxious to settle, he refused to lend his support to the Democratic incumbent, Governor William A. Barstow. The party faithful in Watertown, where he was to make his future home, asked him to deliver a speech for the candidate, but he declined. The Democrats' political principles were too different from his own.<sup>13</sup>

As time went on, the last obstacle to a full endorsement of the Republicans seemingly crumbled. The Whigs, the new party's predecessors, had long been close to various nativist groups, a combination which created suspicion among immigrants. Moreover, when the Whig party virtually disintegrated following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, many former adherents, bereft of their organization and unwilling to join the hated Democrats, began to support the new nativist American party, which in turn often made common cause with the Republicans. By 1856, however, this Know-Nothing influence was waning, and by the fall of that year, Schurz was a full-fledged Republican campaigning actively for the party ticket.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the assertions of many writers, not all Germans were natural supporters of the new party. Like immigrants everywhere, they had faithfully followed the Democrats, and while they were generally opposed to slavery, they, like other Americans, were intensely racist. Thus when the Republican party was being organized, only the so-called Greens, particularly the forty-eighters, joined the new grouping. The majority, including many of the Lutherans and especially those Catholics afraid of liberal freethinkers, remained Democratic.<sup>15</sup>



Schurz was aware of these trends, but hoped to overcome them. For the rest of his life, he sought to wean his countrymen from their prejudices.<sup>16</sup> He was anxious to emerge as an ethnic leader and purposely selected Wisconsin, more particularly Watertown, as his new home because of the political possibilities offered by the Germans there. "After my return from Europe," he confided to Kinkel in March 1855,

I expect to go to Wisconsin . . . . The German element is powerful in that state, the immigrants being so numerous, and they are striving for political recognition. They only lack leaders that are not bound by the restraints of money-getting. There is the place where I can find a sure, gradually expanding field for my work without truckling to the nativistic elements, and there, I hope, in time to gain influence . . . .

In spite of his desire for exercising leadership, however, he was not willing to truckle to prevailing Democratic trends, as he made very clear to the professor by stating: "From now on there can only be two parties in the Union: a Northern and a Southern party—an anti- and a proslavery party, and at present the Democrats up here are only the outpost of the slave-power in the free states."<sup>17</sup> His antislavery convictions were firmly grounded, and his decision which side to join had already been made; in fact, though he lost, he had been nominated for the state legislature on the Republican ticket.<sup>18</sup> Thus Schurz was a Republican by conviction. He did not need encouragement to join the new party, from Hecker or anyone else. And he remained a faithful Republican until 1871.

Whatever may have been Schurz's feeling toward Hecker during the 1850s, he later became quite friendly with the older man. During the Civil War, when Schurz was the commanding general of the 3d Division of the XI Corps, Hecker served under him as a regimental and brigade commander. Wounded at Chancellorsville, Hecker recovered in time to rejoin the division so that he was present at Wauhatchie, where he was unjustly accused by Joseph Hooker of not having carried out orders to come to the aid of General John W. Geary with sufficient dispatch. Outraged by this unjust imputation upon his subordinate and, by indirection, upon himself, Schurz fully supported Hecker, assumed responsibility himself, and demanded a court of inquiry. The court cleared both men, whose friendly relations continued, though as we have seen, Schurz still found Hecker peculiar when he met him in 1867 in St. Louis.<sup>19</sup> By 1872, the two collaborated in the Liberal Republican party. At the convention in Cincinnati, Hecker was present when Schurz, devastated because of the nomination of Horace Greeley, walked into a sad gathering of friends to play Chopin's *Funeral March* on the piano.<sup>20</sup> Old suspicions had been dissipated in mutual comradeship, but the fact remains that in 1854, Hecker's influence upon Schurz was slight.



It thus appears that, while Schurz and Hecker enjoyed tolerable relations, there is no real evidence that it was Hecker's advice that impelled Schurz to join the Republican party. Aside from the fact that Schurz was sympathetic to the antislavery movement before he came to Belleville, at the time of the visit in question Hecker was too ill to evoke anything but pity in Schurz. The great immigrant leader always appreciated the older man, but he found him peculiar, and it is most doubtful that he was ever materially swayed by him.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chester Verne Easum, *The Americanization of Carl Schurz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 92-94.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Baumgardt, *Carl Schurz: Ein Leben zwischen Zeiten und Kontinenten* (Berlin: Wilhelm Andermann, 1939), 249-51.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York: Scribner's, 1936-88), 4:493-95.

<sup>4</sup> Hans L. Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (New York: McClure, 1907-8), 2:41-43.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Schafer, *Intimate Letters of Carl Schurz, 1841-1869* (New York: Da Capo, 1970), 132-33.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Schurz, *Lebenserinnerungen von Carl Schurz* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1906-12), 3:147-48.

<sup>8</sup> Schafer, *Intimate Letters*, 397.

<sup>9</sup> *Speeches, Correspondence and Political Papers of Carl Schurz*, ed. Frederick Bancroft (New York: Putnam, 1913), 1:1-5.

<sup>10</sup> Schurz, *Reminiscences*, 2:14; Adolph Strodtmann, *Gottfried Kinkel: Wahrheit ohne Dichtung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe, 1851), 2:167.

<sup>11</sup> Trefousse, *Schurz*, 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> Schurz, *Reminiscences*, 2:37.

<sup>13</sup> Schafer, *Intimate Letters*, 124; Bancroft, *Speeches*, 1:23.

<sup>14</sup> Schafer, *Intimate Letters*, 173-75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Schafer, *Intimate Letters*, 435, is an example.

<sup>17</sup> Bancroft, *Speeches*, 1:19, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Watertown Democrat*, 6 November 1856.

<sup>19</sup> Schurz, *Reminiscences*, 3:85-94.

<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs of Gustav Koerner, 1809-1896*, ed. Thomas J. McCormack (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1909), 2:557.

