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HIST 306

Civil War and Reconstruction with Dr. Diane Mutti-Burke

German Americans in Missouri:

The American Civil War

Louis Gerteis, a Civil War historian, recalls a common image that Americans had of Germans in the mid-19th century: that of a lager-drinking, Sabbath-breaking, and tenaciously proud group of people (74). While there may have been some truth to this stereotypical depiction, German Americans proved that they had much more to offer American nineteenth-century society than just their vices. German Americans used their cultural pride to create real change in the political landscape of the Civil War era in the United States. Missouri, a scene of intense political debate leading up to and during the Civil War, was a destination for many German immigrants, and was a place in which Germans were particularly politically influential. One of these German Missourians was a young man by the name of Henry Voelkner. Henry's story survives through eight heartfelt letters he wrote to his family in St. Louis during the beginning years of the Civil War. Dated between 1861 and 1862, Henry's correspondence communicates his experiences as a soldier in the Union army, and offers invaluable insight into how his German heritage guided his perspective. Using Henry's personal and localized letters as a base, this paper will focus on the greater implications of his writings. Through the analysis of Henry's eight letters, and aided by other secondary sources, this paper will attempt to illustrate the significance of German Americans in the formation of, and contribution to, the consequential events taking place in Missouri during the Civil War—events which had lasting impacts on the rest of the country.

Passionate and personable, Henry Voelkner's letters detail his thoughts and feelings as well as the important military maneuvers and leaders of the Missouri and Arkansas battlefield. Henry's original letters were eloquently written in the German language, and at certain times Henry alludes to what his life was like in Germany. An example of this is taken from a letter dated October 31, 1861. Stationed in the once bustling, but now war-torn town of Springfield, Missouri, Henry describes to his mother a makeshift bridge his regiment was forced to cross. To illustrate just how dangerous and unreliable the bridge was, Henry writes that, "In Germany they would not have dared let a dog valued at 3 pennies cross" (Voelkner). Henry's reference to life in Germany and use of the German language to communicate with his family suggest that the Voelkner family likely migrated from their homeland to St. Louis, Missouri not too long before 1861. If this is true, then the Voelkners would not have been alone in their voyage across the Atlantic since, beginning in the 1840s, tens of thousands of German and Irish immigrants flooded into St. Louis. The massive migration contributed to the growth of St. Louis, which became the eighth largest city in the United States by the dawn of the Civil War (Gerteis 1).

There are many reasons why Germans migrating to the United States ended up in the rapidly developing Midwestern cities. The author and historian La Vern Rippley proposes that one of the forces drawing Germans to America's heartland was a selection of widely circulating stories published in Germany during the 1830's. These stories, written by Gottfried Duden, conjured up idyllic images of the American Midwest, and depicted Missouri as "a utopia for the oppressed and the downtrodden" (Rippley 44). Duden spoke highly of the United States and articulated Missouri's allure by illustrating its qualities of pristine beauty, tolerance, and freedom. It is not out of the question that Henry's parents or relatives read some of Duden's work and connected with its message, prompting them to join others in the voyage across the Atlantic.

Another possible reason accounting for the migration of Henry's family might have been the increasingly volatile social and political environment of Europe during the 1840s. Frustrated with

the monarchical leadership, European intellectuals and representatives came together in 1848 to create new democratic laws. The efforts of these revolutionaries were cut short, though, as monarchical rulers who still maintained power in Vienna and Berlin regained control and suppressed constitutional reforms. Many revolutionaries were killed, injured, or sent into exile during the backlash of 1848 and, due to their location, German-speaking people were especially affected by the turmoil (Ripley 49-50). Many of these so-called “Forty-eighters” sought refuge in America, bringing with them their intellectual appetite and fiery revolutionary zeal.

The Forty-eighters from Germany contributed significantly to the culture and politics of their new country. This was especially felt in the American Midwest. As Ripley aptly describes, the Forty-eighters proved to be “vociferous, strong-headed” and “often liberal to the point of being radical” (51). With an ability to organize, a fierce determination, and strong political views, these German Americans had no reservations in expressing their adamant opposition to slavery and unyielding support of the newly forming Republican Party (Ripley 52). Historian Alison Clark Efford describes some of the difficulties these Germans faced in organizing their political base. Nativism amongst ‘native’ Americans was one of the biggest obstacles faced by German Americans. Nativists, who were largely enveloped by the Republican Party, were extremely wary of immigrants, and felt that immigrants were a challenge to the traditional, Protestant, British American lifestyle. Through their tenacity, German American Forty-eighters helped shift the focus of the Republican Party by forcing the Republicans to see immigrants as a “positive good for the United States” (Efford 69). Pressured to tone down their anti-religious rhetoric so as not to offend the Northern Protestants, these largely secular German Americans succeeded in spreading their views of anti-slavery and democratic inclusion.

In order to organize the skeptical and less politically motivated immigrants, the Forty-eighters had to be politically savvy. Many German and Irish immigrants who had migrated before 1848 were not Republican and tended to side with the Democratic Party platform. More often than not, Democratic voters saw the Republican

Party as elitist and anti-immigrant. The Forty-eighters, along with other German American thinkers, helped to broaden the appeal of the Republican platform by taking on such issues as nativism, thereby forcing Republican politicians to realize the importance of German American voters (Efford 67). Effectively using German-speaking newspapers like the St. Louis-based *Anzeiger des Westens* and the *St. Charles Demokrat*, German writers in Missouri were able to challenge many aspects of nativism and organize fellow Germans into a powerful voting bloc. The German newspapers created a space for intelligent discussion about pressing political matters, strengthening participation in American democracy while also maintaining German ethnic identity (Gerteis 74).

Even though Henry Voelkner does not make reference to the year 1848 in his letters, his writing still resonates with an awareness and firm political conviction that harnesses the atmosphere of St. Louis Republicanism at the time. Henry's political vigor and devotion to the Union cause is made evident not only by his joining the Union army in the first place, but also in his views regarding the death of his brother. On April 13, 1862, after news of his brother's death in battle reaches him, Henry tries to calm his mourning mother and sister in St. Louis by telling them, "Dear mother and sister, do not permit yourselves to be cast down by grief, but think of your son in love and pride that he as a real man gave up his life for a good cause" (Voelkner). Henry tries to comfort them further when he adds that his brother Wilhelm "gave his life to free downtrodden humanity." Henry's belief that his brother died for a worthy cause in an effort to free 'downtrodden humanity' reveals Henry's anti-slavery and humanitarian beliefs, and somberly echoes the message of fellow German Americans.

Henry, throughout his letters, is constantly asking his family about St. Louis and yearns to return home. Historian Louis Gerteis writes about the significance of the young metropolis to the rest of the United States. Not only was St. Louis teeming with German and Irish immigrants who, as was pointed out, greatly affected the politics of the Republican Party, but St. Louis also had a strategic importance in that it maintained the largest arsenal west of the Mississippi (1). The

United States Arsenal at St. Louis was filled with tens of thousands of muskets, hundreds of thousands of ball cartridges, numerous cannons, and important supplies for producing gun-barrels (Rippley 60). The political significance and potential volatility of the St. Louis Arsenal was underlined by the growing tension between secessionists and Unionists within Missouri. Gerteis describes the tense situation by stating, “St. Louisans were divided along lines of regional heritage” and that “they displayed in microcosm the forces that divided the nation” (2). These forces continued to escalate when, in the 1861 election for Missouri’s governor, pro-slavery Missourians successfully secured the vote for Claiborne Fox Jackson. The democratic election of the secessionist-leaning Jackson was not a welcome sign for the federal Republican Party. It was feared that Jackson, a strong proponent of Missouri secession, would take control of the St. Louis Arsenal and use it for his own political means. With the stockpile of weapons, Jackson could potentially cut Missouri off from Union forces and secure the southern Mississippi valley for the Confederacy (Rippley 60). In order to prevent this, Republican leaders permitted anxious Unionist German volunteers to occupy and protect the arsenal.

The German volunteers, or Wide Awakes, felt it was their duty to protect Missouri from seceding from the Union (Kamphoefner 10). Jackson, as the newly elected governor, was not happy about the German occupation of the arsenal and proceeded to do something about it. Threatening to use force against the Germans, he ordered the Missouri state militia to approach the arsenal. Jackson never attacked the arsenal, but the political standoff prompted the arrest of Jackson’s forces and caused violence to break out between pro-Secessionists and the German volunteers. This clash between state and federal forces caused many secessionists, including Claiborne Fox Jackson, to flee St. Louis.

The German volunteers proved to be successful in repelling Jackson’s forces and keeping the stockpile of weapons out of secessionists’ hands. In German American memory, this confrontation signifies a major event in which the Germans felt that they had helped save Missouri from seceding which, in effect, helped save the Union from falling apart (Rippley 62). While La Vern Rippley agrees with

the significance of the event, he argues that one must be hesitant to attribute the country's fate to one defiant act. Rippley suggests that the situation in Missouri was much more complicated than that, which it surely was. Nevertheless, the Germans proved themselves to be a formidable force in shaping Missouri's political atmosphere.

In a similar vein to the Wide Awakes' brave defense of the St. Louis Arsenal, Henry Voelkner's letters reveal unforgiving attitudes towards Missouri secessionists and illustrate the intensely divisive political atmosphere in Missouri. In his first letter dated October 23, 1861, from Warsaw, Missouri, Henry writes about how he "had lots of fun" with the secessionists by "scaring the wits out of them" (Voelkner). Henry details the way in which the Union forces took "chickens, geese, turkeys, pigs and even cattle" from the secessionists, directly under their noses. In a letter written on January 30, 1862 from Rolla, Missouri, Henry describes a box he desires to send to his family in St. Louis. The contents of the box are spelled out and include a cotton plant from Springfield, a few mussel shells and some glass knobs "taken from a secessionist's house-fireplace ornaments," a box of pictures and a book which also belonged to secessionists, stones from a stalactite cavern, a pair of stockings, and some hay and straw that was "once green and ardent," but are now "symbols of perishableness and the irony of fate" (Voelkner). Henry's motives for stealing objects out of the secessionist's house is difficult to discern, for while the stolen objects may represent acts of vengeance and force, or trophies of war, they could also be objects that Henry was simply intrigued by and felt that no one would ever claim. Perhaps Henry needed something to attest to his life as a soldier, so that he, or somebody else, would have something to remember his experiences by. It is interesting that Henry includes the pieces of hay and straw in his box. The symbolic gesture of these objects gives credence to the fact that Henry was a sensitive and intelligent thinker, who appeared to maintain a keen perspective on life, even while in the midst of a war. It is unclear as to whether Henry ever sent the box to St. Louis, or whether he held on to the secessionist's relics.

While the contents of the box are revealing of Henry's personality and his urge to remember and be remembered, the list of

stolen items more significantly reveals the intimate situation of the war in Missouri. According to historian Diane Mutti-Burke, Missouri was the scene of some of the bloodiest guerilla warfare in all of the Civil War. Through the use of intimidation and threats, guerrilla forces tried to kick Unionists out of their homes. In no way were the guerrillas, known as Bushwhackers, trying to fight fairly. The same is true of Free-Soilers, who employed the same terrorizing tactics. The separation between military and civilian life was blurred, as the two sections intersected in increasingly personal and complicated ways (Mutti-Burke). The abundance of guerrilla warfare within the Missouri countryside was, in part, a reaction to the events that had taken place in St. Louis. The overthrow of Jackson and intrusion of federal forces into Missouri caused many Southern-leaning Missourians to take to the countryside. Slipping in and out of civilian roles, these guerrilla fighters wreaked havoc on Union sympathizers and Union forces. It was these people whom Henry had to watch for as his regiment sought out bigger battles in the Missouri countryside.

The intensity of guerrilla fighting within Missouri spawned some harsh responses from political and military leaders. As the Union commander of the Department of the West, John C. Frémont caused a lot of commotion in his dealings with Missouri's guerrilla fighters. A well-known figure, Frémont had spent years as a Western explorer and was the first Republican Presidential candidate to run in 1856. Having lost the election, but still politically active, Frémont was appointed commander of the newly formed Department of the West in July of 1861. Known as "the Pathfinder," Frémont was thought to be the one who could help save the West for the Union cause (Gerteis 136-140).

John C. Frémont was extremely popular among German Americans. Gerteis attempts to explain Frémont's popularity with the Germans by suggesting that Frémont's associations with European revolutionaries, including ones who had been involved with the 1848 revolutions, endeared him to Germans. Gerteis also suggests that Frémont's more radical views on emancipation caused Germans to side with him (147). The Germans continued to support Frémont, even after Frémont proved himself incapable of politically cooperating with other Republican leaders.

In response to the guerrilla fighting that was causing ever-increasing instability and civilian bloodshed, Frémont issued a proclamation. Frémont's proclamation drastically called for all disloyal Missourians to be shot, and for all disloyal Missourians' slaves to be emancipated (Gerteis 150). Having not run his proclamation by any of the other important political leaders in Missouri, or President Lincoln for that matter, Frémont came under political scrutiny. After continuing clashes with his fellow leaders as to his new policy, Frémont's personality started to come under scrutiny as well. Gerteis reveals that Frémont offended political leaders with his "overt arrogance and detachment" towards them (143). Even after numerous Federal defeats, Frémont continued to maintain an air of arrogance. Contemporaries observed that Frémont's self-importance was getting in the way of his politics. This was especially apparent in Frémont's bodyguard, who accompanied him everywhere he went with a "formality worthy of a European prince" (Gerteis 146). The regality of Frémont's presence in Missouri was not to last long.

John Frémont enters the world of Henry Voelkner's letters at the exact point that Frémont had gone too far, and was to be relieved by President Lincoln of his duty. Henry's tone in the letter supports the notion that Germans were loyal to Frémont to the end. Writing from a camp near Rolla, Missouri on November 27, 1861, Henry begins his letter by discussing his joy at hearing from his sister. Always good about continuing where he left off, Henry goes on to fill in the details of what happened since he last wrote. He then describes to his parents: "The removal from his command of Frémont caused much excitement in the army; the Germans were most upset, while the Americans took it quite cool and expressed themselves publicly that it made no difference to them who their commander was, some few even rejoiced over the removal of Frémont" (Voelkner). Henry goes on in his letter to describe the favorable conditions his army was in, hoping that they might be able to go out one last time with Frémont and secure a Union victory. Henry describes the night as being "marked by much activity and everyone was anxious and in the best of spirits." Henry indicates that the soldiers were rearing for a battle, and that when Frémont was suddenly removed before the battle could

ensue, that the soldiers were dismayed. Henry writes, “Thus the army which we virtually had in a vise and whom we were just about to crush, was given an opportunity to escape and to devastate the entire country in retreat” (Voelkner).

Although seen as a missed opportunity by Henry and his fellow soldiers, Gerteis offers a different perspective: he describes that when the messenger of Lincoln’s removal order arrived at Frémont’s tent, that Frémont had no immediate plan to engage General Price, and was thus removed from his post (159). Perhaps Frémont had riled his troops without fully figuring out what his plan of action was, and while Henry enthusiastically envisioned his approaching conquest, Frémont brooded in his tent over the lost cause of saving himself. Either way, Henry concludes his thoughts on Frémont by suggesting that “the days of Frémont are gone and with them the good standing of the Germans, at least to the greatest extent” (Voelkner).

Henry finally did see some real action in Bentonville, Arkansas during the Battle of Pea Ridge. The intensity of the fighting that Henry faced is detailed in his letter and is supplemented by bits of poetic description and soldier insights. The beloved German general, Sigel, plays a key role in the battle and Henry describes how, when preparing for the battle, Sigel’s “sober demeanor restored our courage” (Voelkner). Within this letter, Henry reveals many emotions. He shows an objective calmness in describing the events; feelings of fear, suspense, and horror at the death he witnessed; a keen awareness as to military strategy; an acknowledgement of his mortality; and an expectation that he will be able to share further details in person, orally, with his family. In fact, throughout his eight letters, Henry often communicates his desire to speak to his family. It seems that when writing Henry is unsatisfied with being contained by words on a page, and that only by speaking in person could he adequately relate all the experiences he was having. At the same time, Henry plans on having the chance to speak with his family again, and although he is at times scared for his life, he seems not to question that this will eventually happen. This sense of determination and resilience is an enduring characteristic of Henry’s and comes through in every one of his letters.

Henry's letters, written about 150 years ago when the future was an abstraction and the reality of now was vibrant and alive, remind the reader of the strange interaction humans have with time. Fortunately, too, for the purposes of historical understanding, Henry's connection with 'the moment' involved writing heartfelt and informative letters to his family about his experiences in the Union army. Henry's perspective proves to be highly informative of the German American experience in Missouri during the Civil War. His experiences also help to guide an investigative approximation into what it was like to live during this critical time in United States history. It is evident that by Henry's account, and the further research inspired by his account, that German Americans did play a significant role in the consequential events that helped shape Missouri's position during the Civil War. By means of massive immigration and the exportation of ideals that were then combined with a strong sense of cultural heritage and purpose, German Americans found that they had much to add to the all-consuming fire of Civil War. Luckily, these eight letters survived the flames to offer a glimpse of Henry Voelkner's perspective, allowing future generations to better understand what it was like to be German American in Missouri during the Civil War.

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