

Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants And Racial Ideology In Nineteenth-century America

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Review

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Anderson, Kristen Layne *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America*. LSU Press, \$48.00 ISBN 9780807161968

A Divided Coalition: The Politics of German Missouri

Missouri has long been a state whose diversity is all-too-often unrecognized or misunderstood by outsiders. There East merges with West and North overlaps with South; it is part Rust Belt, part Farm Belt, and part Ozark hill country. Over the past two centuries it has also been a common destination for numerous immigrant groups hoping to make a better life for themselves in the United States. In *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth Century Missouri*, Kristen Layne Anderson describes the crucial contributions that one of these groups – German Missourians – made to the early political history of the state. Her narrative spans roughly from 1848 to 1870, encompassing the crucial years of political turmoil leading up to the Civil War, the war itself, and the immediate post-war period during which Missourians struggled to define a place in their society, not only for African Americans, but for other marginalized or disenfranchised groups like immigrants, women, and ex-Confederates.

Drawing on an impressive array of secondary and primary sources – including archival collections, government documents, and both English and German-Language newspapers – Anderson argues persuasively for discarding the traditional view that German Missourians operated as an almost monolithic political bloc that opposed slavery expansion before the Civil War, championed emancipation during the war, and fought valiantly for black suffrage and citizenship rights after the war. Instead she advocates what may be called for a “spectrum” model that recognizes the diversity of opinions that existed *within* the German community in Missouri over issues like slavery expansion, emancipation, and black rights, while also emphasizing the steady political

evolution that took place among Missouri Germans over these issues.

For much of the antebellum period, for example, most German Missourians preferred to keep the issue of slavery at arm's length. Germans seldom owned slaves, but just as rarely did they openly challenge or critique the institution, accepting that "slavery was a legal part of Missouri society" that they could not change. (p. 19) This reluctance to address slavery openly stemmed in part from a fear of provoking a nativist backlash against themselves as a "foreign" element trying to undermine the laws and customs of their adopted state. German passivity on the slavery issue came to an end, however, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which marked a "key turning point in German American attitudes toward slavery." (p. 43) After Kansas-Nebraska, German Missourians became increasingly worried that the spread of slavery would hinder their own access to new land in the western territories, and so many of them drifted steadily toward the anti-slavery or "free soil" camps. A few even openly discussed emancipating Missouri's slave population, talk that provoked alarm among Missouri nativists who accused them of "trying to remake America in a European image. (p. 74)

During the Civil War, the evolution of German attitudes toward slavery accelerated. As ardent supporters of the Union – an astounding 80 percent of Union volunteers in the three-month regiments created in 1861 were German (p. 88) – Missouri Germans increasingly embraced emancipation, first as a war measure and then as a positive goal in itself. They formed emancipation societies, supported General John C. Frémont's "confiscation policy," criticized Lincoln for being too slow in attacking slavery, and even helped defeat St. Louis's Republican congressman Frank P. Blair in the 1862 election because they considered him too soft on the issue. During this period the German community, particularly in St. Louis, fractured into "radical" and "conservative" camps, both competing with one another for political influence at the municipal and state levels of government. Both generally supported emancipation, but they clashed over issues like black suffrage, the presence of "contraband" (or "fugitive") slaves in St. Louis, or whether the government should recruit black soldiers. Two flashpoints of conflict between these groups occurred during the St. Louis mayoral race of 1864, and the political battle over Missouri's 1863 emancipation ordinance. Most conservative Germans supported the ordinance, while the radicals assailed it as being too gradual because it would not have freed *all* slaves in Missouri until 1876.

As long as the war continued, radical Germans tended to hold the upper hand, at least within the German community. After the war, Missouri Germans continued their political evolution. During the immediate post-war period the dominant political concern became deciding what place Missouri's newly freed black population would hold in their society, and on this issue as well Germans took a variety of positions. Many radical Germans aggressively championed legal and constitutional reforms that would guarantee the right of black Missourians to acquire an education, access public transportation and accommodations, worship freely, and conduct their own economic lives, not to mention securing the right to vote for black males. On these and other issues, conservative Germans tended to take a more cautious, sometimes skeptical approach. Some Germans, for example, applauded President Johnson's veto of the 1866 Civil Rights Bill, while others opposed the integration of segregated spaces like St. Louis streetcars, hotels, ballrooms, and other public facilities.

No issue proved more divisive, however, than black suffrage, to which Anderson devotes the final chapter of her book. German conservatives tended to oppose black suffrage. During the 1865 constitutional convention, for example, organs of the conservative German press like the *Neue Anzeiger des Westens* criticized an amendment offered by German radical delegate Arnold Krekel that would have extended suffrage *both* to white immigrants and the freedmen, arguing that "the two questions fundamentally have nothing to do with each other." (p. 176) On this question, at least, German conservatives tended to hold the upper hand, both within their own community and in the state at large. The 1865 convention ultimately rejected black suffrage, which was defeated again in 1868 by a referendum on a constitutional amendment that would have gradually extended the voting franchise to black males. At that referendum, even the heavily German wards in St. Louis voted overwhelmingly *against* black suffrage. Consequently, black Missourians would not receive the vote until the ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870, the same year (ironically) that Missouri repealed its disenfranchisement measures against ex-confederates.

There is much to like about this book: the author has clearly synthesized a huge amount of research to produce a concise, carefully argued monograph that fills an obvious void in previous scholarship related to this period in Missouri's history. I find little to argue with in her major conclusions. That being said, a few minor defects in this book bear mentioning. One concerns Anderson's style and organization. Although for the most part her prose is crisp and clear, she can occasionally become somewhat repetitive, and the over-use of section headings

within her chapters can be a bit distracting. Additionally, at several points in her narrative Anderson mentions the “forty-eighters” – Germans who immigrated to the United States after the political upheavals of 1848 in their home country. She views them as a key determinant of German political radicalism in Missouri, but does not elaborate on the source of their radicalism. Although Anderson does cite historians like Bruce Levine and Mischa Honeck who have written about the politics of the “forty-eighters” in greater detail, she herself does not explain how the events of 1848 in Germany could have so decisively shifted these people in the direction of radical politics in Missouri. It might have edified her readers if she did. Likewise, since many of her subjects were as yet un-naturalized immigrants, it might have benefited her readers to include a brief explanation of the naturalization process at that time.

These reservations should not, however, obscure the greater merits of Anderson’s work. She has produced what will likely become a go-to reference work on the political history of German Missourians from the late antebellum period through the tumultuous years of the Civil War and Reconstruction. That is no small accomplishment, and I recommend that all students of Missouri history – whether professional historians or lay persons – add it to their libraries.

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