

FRANK BARON, *Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters*, Yearbook of German-American Studies, Supplemental Issue, Vol. IV (Topeka, KS: The Society for German-American Studies, 2012), 254 pp.

In *Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters*, Frank Baron aims to tie together two important strands of research on nineteenth-century America that had previously been mostly dealt with independently. While the bulk of Lincoln studies only cursorily glanced at German immigrants, by far the most numerous group of newcomers in antebellum America and thus a major factor in any ambitious politician's calculations, German-American studies rarely found Lincoln at the center of their attention. Yet Baron claims that in the years leading up to the 1860 presidential election the eventual Republican candidate not only "recognized the power of the German vote" but there even was a "quiet alliance between German-Americans and Abraham Lincoln" (3).

Ironically, the structure of Baron's book reflects the aforementioned problems of historiography. While the first half almost exclusively deals with certain aspects of German-American political participation in the United States (Lincoln only makes a short appearance when he meets with German dignitaries on a trip to Kansas in 1859), the final three chapters mostly cover the well-known stories of Lincoln's nomination and election, without offering too much new insight into the role German-Americans played in the process. In between, though, the author presents a brief yet intriguing analysis on Lincoln's efforts to secure the German immigrant vote for his party, and ultimately, for himself.

When Baron speaks of German-Americans he often, albeit not always, really means members of Turner societies and the so-called Forty-Eighters, whose revolutionary experience and love of freedom forced (or at least incited) them to emigrate to the United States and made them natural allies of the antislavery Republican party. Baron starts out by giving a short history of the New York Turner Society that greatly benefits from his access to previously unused sources from the organization's archives. With the Turners' attention shifting from labor-related issues to the antislavery movement after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska-Act in 1854, Baron directs his own focus to the free states' campaign against slavery in Kansas. He finds that Germans, often of Turner or Forty-Eighter background, were eager to participate in the Emigrant Aid Societies' efforts to send free settlers to the contested

territory. Some of them even joined John Brown in his battles with slaveholding ‘border ruffians’ from neighboring Missouri.

Rather unexpectedly, Baron then moves on to the nativist challenge of immigrant power in the United States. The Know-Nothings of the 1850s were deeply suspicious of beer-drinking, strange-talking, and often catholic foreigners that flooded the ports of North America and by their sheer numbers made their influence felt in society and politics. Even before the nativist American Party slowly merged with the antislavery Republicans, a still rather obscure Lincoln expressed his opposition to the oppression of any people, including black slaves but also white immigrants. It was, according to Baron, a first step toward an alliance between German voters and the future president. When a coalition of American and Republican lawmakers in Massachusetts restricted the voting rights of new citizens for two years after naturalization, Germans were outraged. Lincoln, sensing a severe problem for future Republican nominees in the western states, seized the opportunity to denounce the measure in a letter to German editor Theodore Canisius that was soon reprinted in the influential *Daily Illinois State Journal*. While none of this is new to historians, it is here that Baron drives home his case most forcefully. The author argues that Lincoln, who himself was in dire straits after the unsuccessful senate race of 1858 against Douglas, bought the equally broke Canisius a printing press that was to be put to good use when Lincoln needed the journalist’s support in 1860. By shrewd politics, an alliance between the Illinois hopeful and the German-Americans was established.

The closing chapters of *Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants* deal with Lincoln’s campaign to be nominated and eventually elected president of the United States. While Baron is not able to prove that Germans provided the necessary swing votes and cannot quite explain why liberty-loving Germans should have abandoned radical candidate William H. Seward for Lincoln, he maintains that at least Lincoln’s victory over former nativist Edward Bates at Chicago was a direct outcome of German intervention. Lengthy accounts of the nomination process at the Republican Convention (without much relevance for a study of German-Americans) lead to rather vague conclusions of a “natural” (153) alliance of Turners/Forty-Eighters and the Republican Party on grounds of antislavery thought.

As indicated, Baron’s analysis does not always live up to the promises made in the introductory chapter. Perhaps the biggest problem is the author’s imprecise use of the term

“German-Americans,” which can at times mean “Turners and Forty-Eighters” and at other times “German-Americans in general.” Baron, it seems, overestimates the influence that former radicals of the German revolution exerted over their fellow emigrants. Far from being a majority of the newcomers, the small group of political refugees was dwarfed by the millions of compatriots that crossed the Atlantic in search of economic prosperity and, above all, land. Baron clearly overstates his case when he claims that “[a]ll over the United States, Germans instinctively recognized the affinity between the struggles for freedom in Europe and in the United States” (23) and thus joined American free soilers in the struggle for Kansas. It was certainly the ‘soil,’ rather than the ‘freedom,’ that turned German eyes toward the western territories.

Baron clearly buys the Turners’ own argument that revolutionary zeal and moral opposition to slavery led German settlers to embrace the politics of the Republican party. Like New York Forty-Eighter Friedrich Kapp, he senses “the spirit of the unsuccessful revolutions alive again in totally different conditions and locations” (69). More often than not, however, German actions simply reflect the economic and political interests of immigrants hoping to prosper in a foreign, and sometimes hostile, environment. When German-Americans opposed the Democrats for their complicity with slavery, they did so to keep the American west open for German homesteaders. When they raged against the Massachusetts law, they fought for their voting rights as naturalized citizens of the United States, not as German revolutionaries reliving the nightmares of the “Reaktionsära.”

Some basic weaknesses of Baron’s historical writing should also be mentioned. The first few chapters seem strangely unconnected, as if they were written as separate essays and later quickly assembled. Even more troublesome is the author’s disposition to include absurdly long block quotes, sometimes covering two full pages or more, from primary sources into his analysis. The content of these passages rarely justifies the enormity of the quote. However, the book closes with multiple appendices containing primary sources both in the original German and an English translation that should prove useful for further studies of German-American culture and politics in the United States.

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