

Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America

Darrel E. Bigham
University of Southern Indiana

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Bigham, Darrel E. "Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 347-348.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12410>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

of better-known figures and including people barely identified in history except by skin color. Her strength is in laying out slavery's strict parameters and reminding us of its constrictive power, yet she seems inspired by the people in this book, and so should her readers.

Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America, by Kristen Layne Anderson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. viii, 278 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$48.00 hardcover and e-book.

Reviewer Darrel E. Bigham is professor of history and director of Historic Southern Indiana emeritus, University of Southern Indiana. He is the author of *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (2005) and *Reflections on a Heritage: The German Americans in Southwestern Indiana* (1980).

The title of this work is a bit unfortunate. Besides the awkward first word, the study is much narrower than it suggests. It is not about *all* Germans but about "German radicals" in St. Louis between 1848 and about 1868. It does not, moreover, offer much by way of context—that is, how these people and this place compared to or with their counterparts in other places, especially in river border cities such as Cincinnati, Evansville, Louisville, and upriver communities in Iowa.

Kristen Anderson asserts, without much evidence, that her book is the *first* analysis of such Germans' opposition to slavery and how the Civil War and emancipation affected their views on race. She acknowledges that the "radicals" represented a fraction of the larger German-speaking communities of St. Louis, which, like other midwestern cities, gained a large number of German immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s. St. Louis had a large Roman Catholic population, as well as "Old Lutherans" who built the Missouri Synod. It was also a center for the ecumenical Evangelical Synod of North America. There were also the "Forty-Eighters," free-thinking liberals like Carl Schurz. The "Grays" or "church Germans" thought quite differently from "Greens" like Schurz about the Union, emancipation, and race, and their leaders were prominent opponents of the Irish bishops in the East who urged Catholics to become acculturated. The dynamics of intra-German American St. Louis, in short, need a fuller discussion.

Having offered this cautionary note about the author's claims, I should acknowledge that her extensive use of German-language primary sources is impressive. She relies heavily on the *Anzeiger des Westens* and the *Westliche Post*, two prominent German-language newspapers. The former, originally Democratic, became Republican after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and was a prominent supporter of German

radical positions. After it went out of business in 1863, its new owner again made it a Democratic paper, the *Neue Anzeiger des Westens*. The *Post* was established in 1857 and remained a solidly Republican publication through the 1860s. It survived into the 1930s.

After providing a valuable introduction, which includes an overview of St. Louis on the eve of the Civil War era, Anderson develops her narrative in six chapters. The catalyst for the emergence of the Republican Party among many Germans was, as it was for many native-born Americans, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which they perceived as a threat to their opportunity for further development in the West. Their opposition was economic, not moral. In the next and longest chapter of the book, Anderson traces the radicalization of Germans on matters of slavery and race between 1854 and 1860. She acknowledges that Catholics and Lutherans were not so inclined, suggesting religious roots for Germans' positions on the future of African Americans. In chapters three and four she discusses the impact of the Civil War on St. Louis Germans, some of whom supported the Union cause. Radicals came to support emancipation because abolition was perceived as offering the same sort of fair chance that immigrants desired. For the same reason, many supported a civil rights amendment to the Constitution. In the last two chapters, Anderson explores the extent to which German Republicans were willing to stand with African Americans. Radicals backed the suffrage amendment, although most Germans in St. Louis opposed it. By 1870, even radical Germans retreated from advocating blacks' rights. Fear of resurgent nativism and anti-German cultural issues like Sunday laws became more important to them. Whiteness trumped equality.

How the trajectory of German Republicans' stance on emancipation and race was distinctive remains unanswered here. Many native whites, Democrats as well as Whigs, also joined the Republican Party after the Kansas-Nebraska Act and were staunch pro-Abraham Lincoln Unionists. They supported the abolition, civil rights, and suffrage amendments. But most believed that that was all that was needed. By the early 1870s, many had become advocates of civil service reform. Quite a few returned to the Democratic Party—notably Lyman Trumbull and John Macaulay Palmer in neighboring Illinois.

This study, which is aimed at an academic audience, should encourage further research into the internal dynamics of German-speaking Missouri as well as other nearby states that gained substantial numbers of German immigrants after 1836 and well into the 1880s.