INTRODUCTION

Naturalized Citizens, Transnational Perspectives, and the Arc of Reconstruction

On a June day in 1906, thousands of St. Louisans gathered in Forest Park for the unveiling of a statue of General Franz Sigel.1 A group of immigrants, having commissioned the bronze likeness of their Civil War hero, now displayed the pageantry for which German Americans were renowned. Elderly veterans who had fought “mit Sigel” marched in formation, choirs of men sang German folk songs, and local dignitaries addressed the crowd from a platform decked with American flags. One after another, they recounted how “our naturalized fellow-citizens of German birth” had helped defeat the Confederacy, saving the Union and securing its “free institutions.”2

The entire dedication celebrated the nineteenth-century nation-state. The officiants made much of Sigel’s decision to swear his loyalty to his adopted country. They also linked his battle to preserve the United States in the 1860s to his efforts to unify Germany in 1848. Yet the proceedings largely neglected the political ideology that the general had considered inseparable from his nationalism during those years – liberalism. Sigel, like revolutionaries and reformers around the world, had assumed that nation-states would enshrine the individual rights of their male residents in law. Although the speakers in Forest Park referred obliquely to Sigel’s “noble ardor for human rights,” no one explained that the German republic he had envisioned in 1848 was altogether different from the authoritarian German Empire that Otto von Bismarck had eventually founded in 1871. No one mentioned his opposition to slavery or his support for African-American suffrage after emancipation. Indeed, the only man who alluded to the postwar years expressed relief that Americans had put the troublesome

1 On the sculpture itself, see Caroline Loughlin and Catherine Anders, Forest Park (Columbia: Junior League of St. Louis and University of Missouri Press, 1986), 97, 261.
2 St. Louis Mississippi Blätter [Sunday edition of the Westliche Post], June 24, 1906. All translations are my own unless a translator is identified.
issues of the conflict behind them. “Those who once fought each other,” he said, “now stand together, unified.” Most white Unionists were pleased that the federal government no longer antagonized white Southerners by upholding black citizenship. Contemplating the Civil War era from their vantage point at the turn of the century, the immigrants testified that the nationalism of 1848 and the 1860s had prevailed. Liberalism was more in doubt.

This book argues that the activities of German Americans not only reflected the rise and fall of liberal nationalism in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, they helped ensure it. I take up the subject that the ceremony in Forest Park pointedly ignored: the debate over African-American citizenship. Black rights were most fiercely contested during the twelve years that followed the American Civil War, the extraordinary period known as Reconstruction. Between 1865 and 1877, white Republicans first threw themselves into equal rights for black Southerners and then quickly retreated from the cause. The German-American Republicans who animate this study — men such as Franz Sigel — played a unique role in these developments for two main reasons, both of which were on display decades later in Forest Park. As new American citizens themselves, they possessed a distinctive insight into citizenship, and as people who had lived on two continents, they brought a transnational perspective to Reconstruction politics. Ultimately, German Americans, who were politically divided but formed by far the largest immigrant group in the ruling Republican Party, would see to it that the fate of the nation-state and individual rights in North America on the one hand and in Europe on the other were intertwined.

German Americans suggest a new interpretation of the arc of white commitment to African-American citizenship, which ascended during the 1860s, reached its zenith around 1870, bowed downward during the 1870s,
and sunk to its nadir at about the time of the festivities in Forest Park in 1906. Of course, the freed people themselves propelled lawmakers forward, demanding equality and asserting control over their work, leisure, relationships, sexuality, mobility, religion, and education. Since Southern whites generally resisted these endeavors, however, the attitudes of the Northern whites who controlled the federal government became vitally important. Republicans in Congress, it turned out, would recognize suffrage as the “fullest manifestation” of American citizenship. In 1866, they drafted the Fourteenth Amendment, which conferred national citizenship on all persons born or naturalized in the United States. Congressmen then passed legislation requiring the states of the former Confederacy to enfranchise African-American men and proposed the Fifteenth Amendment to outlaw racial discrimination in electoral law. But soon after the states ratified this final amendment in 1870 the Northern will to protect black men’s suffrage began to subside. Although Republicans did not repudiate the revised Constitution, it became difficult for them to muster enough support to defend African-American rights. Republicans essentially ended an era in


1877, when they settled the previous year's disputed presidential election by agreeing to withdraw federal troops from the South almost completely.10 During Reconstruction, German-American Republicans were motivated to promote and then abandon racially inclusive policies for many of the same reasons as other white Unionists. Most of them were initially adherents of “free labor ideology” who believed that arming black men with the vote would allow African Americans to exact fair compensation for their work and remake the South as a region of independent farmers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers. As historian Eric Foner has argued, when industrialization and labor conflict in the North eroded this vision during the 1870s, Northern politicians’ sympathy for Southern workers dissipated.11 German Republicans were also intent on unifying the war-torn country. During the 1860s, they thought that African Americans would safeguard the Union by acting as a political counterweight to disloyal white Southerners, but as time passed, they increasingly longed to reconcile with former Confederates. The unveiling in Forest Park showed how this latter urge could undercut the war’s emancipatory legacy.12 Meanwhile, the most violent white opponents of black rights wore down the resolve that would have been necessary to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment.13


Although German-American Republicans valued free labor and reunification just as their colleagues did, their peculiarities would also influence the trajectory of Reconstruction. First of all, the immigrants were, like the people freed from bondage, new citizens. In fact, I propose that immigrants from Europe were the archetypal new citizens in the eyes of Americans. Individuals such as Sigel declared that they embodied citizenship’s essence. Their naturalization, as feted in Forest Park, symbolized the liberal notion that men who pledged their fealty to the nation would be guaranteed individual rights. Sometimes immigrant men’s acquisition of citizenship could even serve as a template for other aspiring citizens. During the 1860s, leading German-American Republicans explicitly argued that emancipation should bring the freedmen the same political rights that naturalization had effectively secured for male immigrants. Black men should be able to tread the path to voting citizenship that they had pioneered.

While describing the emergence and then eclipse of arguments likening immigrants and African Americans, I probe the limitations inherent in an understanding of citizenship centered on German immigrant men. Preconceptions about race, gender, and political economy inhibited German-American Republicans. Many historians have found that as male Europeans claimed American citizenship, they acted to reinforce the rhetorical line between whiteness and blackness. Descriptions of immigrants using this technique can be found in Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, but they have been further developed under the rubric of “whiteness studies.” Significant contributions include David R. Roediger, Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London: Verso, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). For evidence of historians’ reception of whiteness studies, see Jon Gjerde, “Here in America There Is Neither King nor Tyrant: European Encounters with Race, ‘Freedom,’ and Their European Past,” Journal of the Early Republic 9 (1999): 673–90; Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” International Labor and Working Class History.


Donna R. Gabaccia uses the label “immigrant paradigm” for the idea that the experience of male Europeans was normative and represents the thrust of American history. She points out that scholars are quite aware that white men were exceptionally privileged, so historians are suitably skeptical of this paradigm. Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History,” Journal of American History 86 (1999): 1115–34. Another historian discusses a similarly self-congratulatory approach to the immigrant past, the “Ellis Island paradigm.” Paul Spickard, Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4–11.

Republicans denounced their Democratic countrymen who appealed to immigrants as white men, but they perpetuated more subtle discursive distinctions between European immigrants and black Americans. At a time before ethnicity and race were clearly differentiated, German immigrants insisted that they belonged to an ethnic group. As scholars of the twentieth-century have observed, ethnicity, viewed as cultural and malleable, was defined in contradistinction to race, which was understood as more biological and fixed.17 Even the German Americans who attacked this dichotomy championed ethnicity in ways that inadvertently encouraged the belief that race constituted a more legitimate basis for exclusion. An ethnic identity predicated on the difference between culture and biology encumbered their work. German-American constructions of ethnicity and their effect on Reconstruction politics consequently form central themes of this book.

Privileging the experience of immigrant men also produced a narrow form of citizenship that revolved around male voting rights during the 1850s and 1860s. Few Americans supported women's suffrage, but German immigrants were especially keen to prevent it. Unpropertied men had first won the right to vote as potential soldiers and heads of household, roles that any man could theoretically assume precisely because no woman could.18


Men’s rights rested on their authority over women who were subordinated according to heterosexual social norms. Traditional family structures held a special place in a community dislocated by migration. German Americans prized their reputation for harmonious male-headed households. The fact that many Anglo-American feminists sought to curb social drinking also distanced immigrants from the campaign for women’s rights, leading the majority to conclude that gender equality was antithetical to ethnic and racial inclusivity. The Republicans among them advocated patterning the citizenship of African-American men after that of male immigrants, not non-voting women.

Finally, immigrant men’s tendency to see their own experience as normative discouraged a view of citizenship that included economic rights beyond the freedom to enter a labor contract. German Americans were thus ill-prepared to support the freed people in their quest for economic justice. Most of them, familiar with Europe’s hereditary nobility and North America’s government-sanctioned slavery, believed that state interference in the marketplace profited only the wealthy. Protections for workers encroached on the principle of limited government, most German Americans thought during the 1860s, and were unnecessary at best. German-born socialists complained that even struggling working-class immigrants accepted the “delusion” that free markets and political rights were enough to give every industrious individual a fair shot at wealth. Those very socialists, of course, provided a counterpoint to the reigning liberal nationalism of the Civil War decade. A small yet vocal cast of German-American activists critiqued liberal ideology and followed their own political strategy. It is not incidental to this book’s argument that they decided to collaborate with liberals and black Southerners up until about 1870. Political economy was as relevant to Reconstruction citizenship as race or gender.


German-American Republicans such as Sigel were not only conscious of being new citizens, they were also instinctively transnational in outlook. This second proclivity contributed to Republican Reconstruction’s astonishing rise and precipitous fall. The women and men who fled German Europe after the Revolutions of 1848 – dubbed “Forty-Eighters” – infused the American Republican Party with a passionate liberal nationalism. In Europe, they had found it difficult to conceive of a united Germany that would not recognize the rights of men to participate in their own governance and freely dissent, organize, worship, work, and trade. In the United States, naturalization only reaffirmed the refugees’ conviction that the nation-state and individual rights were tightly bound. Forty-Eighters were quick to concur with Abraham Lincoln that the survival of the Union intact was essential to the maintenance of its free institutions. Largely lacking the president’s moderation, however, they argued that abolishing slavery and, later, enfranchising African-American men would strengthen the nation still further.


More significantly, I contend that the same German immigrants who connected liberalism and nationalism facilitated their decoupling. Just months after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, Forty-Eighters were transfixed by an undisputedly illiberal nationalist, Bismarck. My argument hinges on the German-American response to the Franco-Prussian War, which united Germany on the terms dictated by Bismarck’s Prussia. Proud of Germany’s manifest might, German Americans would toy with a model of national greatness that privileged racial hierarchy over individual rights. In the United States, the immigrants who had campaigned for African-American suffrage would lead the Liberal Republican challenge to Republican race policy. Defending the citizenship rights of African Americans, the Liberal Republicans said in 1872, had become an obstacle to national unity. Although the name of the new party suggested otherwise, Liberal Republicanism subverted liberal nationalism well before the Compromise of 1877.

The immigrant story, with its emphasis on citizenship and international comparison, generates a new narrative of postwar politics that integrates ethnicity, race, gender, and political economy. German Republicans accentuated cultural trends and tightened political turning points, making the contours of Reconstruction much more dramatic than they would have been in the immigrants’ absence. This feat was possible only because their actions were, at times, decisive.

German immigrants overestimated their influence, exaggerating their political clout and overrating Sigel’s military skill, but they did indeed play a crucial part in Reconstruction. The Irish were the largest immigrant group in the country, but the second-place Germans outnumbered them considerably in the Union Army. At the beginning of the Civil War, more than 1,300,000 residents of the United States hailed from Europe’s German-speaking lands. By its end, about one-tenth of Union soldiers had been German-born. Although sizable numbers of Germans settled along the


eastern seaboard, the heart of German America lay in the Middle West. 29
The immigrants made up a particularly high proportion of the population in the region’s “German triangle.” This area stretched from Cincinnati in the east to St. Louis in the west and then north to Milwaukee, incorporating broad swaths of land in between. 30 I concentrate on the states at the tips of the triangle, Ohio, Missouri, and Wisconsin. In 1860, 7.2, 7.5, and 16.0 percent of the people living in these respective states had emigrated from German Europe, and Germans were overrepresented in the largest cities. 31
When observers factored in the immigrants’ American-born children, they reckoned that Milwaukee was roughly half German and Cincinnati and St. Louis were each around a third Teutonic. 32
To Anglo-American politicians, German-American Midwesterners appeared to be an important bloc of swing voters. Republicans would attest to their interest in a German constituency by inserting a pro-immigrant plank in their 1860 platform and commissioning numerous German-born army officers. One of the generals, Carl Schurz, gave the keynote address at the Republican national convention in 1868. In private letters, Republican politicians would fret revealingly about losing immigrant support in 1872 and 1876. That a little more than half of all German-American voters probably continued to side with the Democrats only made German Republicans more valuable to their party. 33 It is important to acknowledge that the opposition attracted immigrants too, but the Republicans seized the initiative during the Civil War era. Democrats had to scramble to respond.
The partisan allegiances of German Americans varied from state to state. Ohio, overwhelmingly white and densely populated, was an electoral battleground whose German residents were as politically divided as Ohioans as