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Abstract: This is an excerpt from the book, *Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters*, published in Lawrence, KS by the Society of German-American Studies.

Excerpt:

Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters

Introduction

Reporting from Springfield, Illinois, on December 9, 1860, only a matter of days after the election, Henry Villard, correspondent for the *New York Herald*, made a remarkable assertion about Lincoln's election to the presidency:

In Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin, native Republicans now openly acknowledge that their victory was, if not wholly, at least to a great extent, due to the large accessions they received in the most hotly contested sections from the German ranks.

That an immigrant population should be the decisive element in a national election was unprecedented. Despite a cautious reservation ("if not wholly, at least to a great extent"), Villard offered a controversial assessment. He was saying, in effect, that Lincoln owed his success to German-Americans.* Historians since Villard have noted, on occasion, the formidable German vote for Lincoln, but assertions about its significance have been challenged. It is not surprising that the claims have been criticized or not taken at all seriously. Historians have ignored Villard's perspective.¹ Statistics available for the 1860 election do not provide the evidence required to corroborate Villard's position. Are there other options? Is there a convincing test for Villard's assertion about the German factor? Can it survive close scrutiny?

On the one hand, Villard had extraordinary access to the key political figures of the events he observed. The door was open for interviews with Lincoln. Villard had personal access to Illinois Senators Stephen Douglas and Lyman Trumbull. He could call on former Lieutenant-Governor Gustave Koerner, a

* Occasional references to Germans, instead of German-Americans, reflect general practice of the 1850s.

¹ Frederick C. Luebke, *Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

German-American, any time. Lincoln introduced Villard to his secretary, John G. Nicolay, who was also a native German. Murat Halstead, Villard's editor at the *Cincinnati Commercial*, commented on the reporter's work, which "had the merits of terse statement, evident sincerity, and reliability. The style was not ambitious and the meaning not obscure. He had a keen eye for the essential points of a complex state of facts."² Villard had established his credentials as a journalist by covering the Lincoln-Douglas Debates for the conservative *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*. Although he remained silent about it in his memoirs, he gave speeches for Douglas in Illinois cities.³ Later, he reported during the Civil War for several other papers, including the *New York Tribune*. He demonstrated skill in major business ventures with German investors and gained international fame through the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad.⁴

On the other hand, despite his French name, which Villard adopted when he immigrated just seven years earlier, his name was originally Hilgard; he was actually a native German. Unlike many other immigrants, he had not participated in Germany's recent failed revolution, but he developed sympathies for the revolution at an early age. Villard was part of the story that he deemed a remarkable success. He was only a schoolboy, thirteen years old, when he persuaded his parents to travel for hours from his home in Zweibrücken to Frankfurt to engage in sightseeing, but he used the occasion to observe the heated political debates of the revolutionary parliament. When he returned home, he showed his sympathies with the revolution to his schoolmates by wearing a Hecker hat with a red feather. In the United States, he sought ways to express his opposition to the reactionary politics represented by his fatherland. In Wisconsin, he edited the *Volksblatt* of Racine, with which he tried to win over the German population from the Democrats to the newly formed Republican Party. He approached Senators Douglas and Trumbull to support a settlement of a German colony in Kansas. Only twenty-five years old, the young journalist had an obvious interest in highlighting a success in which his countrymen contributed. His observation of German voting strength deserves consideration, nevertheless, if only to determine the degree to which a German role can be documented. Villard raises important questions, even if he fell short by not providing evidence to answer them. That will be the goal of this book.

The perceived potential of the German role in the elections of the 1850s was the result of an unprecedented influx of immigrants. From 1840 to 1849 the number of German immigrants reached 385,434. In the years from 1850 to 1854 there was a significant increase; 654,291 Germans arrived. The highpoint was 1854, with 215,009 immigrants.⁵ Prominent among the arrivals were the refugees of the failed 1848–49 revolutions, the so-called Forty-Eighters, many of whom had been members of Turner societies. In Germany they had fought to establish a unified, democratic society, but they had failed.

² Alexandra Villard de Borchgrave and John Cullen, *Villard: The Life and Times of an American Titan* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 108.

³ James M. Bergquist, "The Political Attitudes of the German Immigrant in Illinois, 1848–1860" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1965), 259.

⁴ Thomas C. Fuchs, "Henry Villard: A Citizen of Two Worlds." (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1991); Henry Villard, *Lincoln on the Eve of '61* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).

⁵ Horst Ueberhorst, *Turner unterm Sternenbanner. Der Kampf der deutsch-amerikanischen Turner für Einheit, Freiheit und soziale Gerechtigkeit 1848 bis 1918* (Munich: Moos, 1978), 40.

Persecution followed. The most articulate advocates of change became objects of harsh reprisals and had to flee. Because the German arrivals were outspoken, many Americans viewed this immigration wave as a threat. There were efforts to exclude German-Americans from political power by restricting voting rights. The recent arrivals possessed political experience and organizational skills, and in the United States they were not prepared to be silenced. A meticulous investigation of their engagement in American social and political life brings to light the fact that many, like the young Villard, could revive the spirit of the failed struggle for liberty in a new cause. They discovered this cause in the fight against slavery, and they generally turned to the Republican Party. They took control of the German newspapers, founded many new ones, and redirected public opinion within the German-American communities.

A quiet alliance between the German-Americans and Abraham Lincoln was a product of coincidences and favorable political conditions. For Lincoln it was important not to alienate the conservative population, and yet at an early stage he recognized the power of the German vote and its potential for deciding elections in Illinois. He risked alienating those conservative voters by opposing restrictions on the voting rights of naturalized citizens. It was Lincoln's personal and precise message to the German-Americans, who were vocal in reacting to the anti-immigrant movement: He was on their side. In 1859, he reiterated the same message in a German newspaper that he himself financed secretly. Theodore Canisius, the publisher of that paper, was probably instrumental in relaying the German-American and Turner support for Lincoln at an early stage.

At a time when Lincoln experienced financial difficulties, the secret investment in a costly printing press suggests that he was beginning to think seriously about running for the presidency. That consideration puts a new light on the events before his nomination in Chicago. It means that in his private calculations the German factor ranked as a priority.

The nomination of Lincoln for the presidency became a realistic possibility when Senator Seward of New York, the German favorite, failed to win on the first ballot at the Chicago convention. German recognition and appreciation of Lincoln's early initiative on voting rights manifested itself in the series of unexpected events that helped him overcome Seward's initial advantage. The German *Turn-Zeitung* was the first national periodical to propose Lincoln as an alternative to Seward. Lincoln was able to overcome his initial disadvantages to win the nomination, but the role of German politicians and journalists in this surprising turn of events deserves a close examination. There is evidence that Lincoln was keenly aware of the strength of the German influence, and he was able to benefit from it.

Resilience from past defeats was a common denominator for the German Republicans and Lincoln. This study will reconstruct the convergence of their common interests. A gradual and uneven process is the background to Villard's provocative assertion about the preeminence of the German factor. That process reflected the crisis provoked by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the power of immigration to influence events on the national stage.

The German immigrants brought with them the enduring concept of the *Turnverein*. The primary activity of the Turners was physical exercise, including gymnastics, but from the beginning it was

much more than that. To understand its impact, it is necessary to review its dramatic evolution before it was transplanted to the United States. Records are not always available to determine who was a member and who was not. Most Forty-Eighters were members, but even those who declined membership participated in the events of the society occasionally. In general, Germans were part of this social network, which became ubiquitous in America in the 1850s. Every major city acquired its *Turnverein*. In September 1859, at the Chicago meeting of the national union of the Turners; fifty-two societies were represented. To appreciate the potential of the Turner Society as an instrument of American politics it is necessary to review its history.

The father of the Turner movement was Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, popularly known as *Turnvater* Jahn. Born in Lenz in Brandenburg, he studied theology and philology in Halle, Göttingen, and Greifswald but did not complete his studies. He earned his livelihood by giving private lessons. He was primarily responsible for two important publications: *Deutsches Volkstum* (1810) and, with Ernst Bernhard Eiselen, *Die deutsche Turnkunst* (1816). The first work treated the topic of national identity. Jahn aggressively promoted the need for a national consciousness, and he did that with greater attention to detail than did his predecessors. He expected the German people to be active in shaping their future. The organization of a unified national state was a fundamental requirement. Jahn was also concerned about the condition of peasants, and when he argued for the elimination of all forms of involuntary servitude (*Knechtschaft*), he prepared the future Turner opposition to slavery. Although he did not ask for a revolution, he demanded concrete reforms. Jahn's social and political philosophy intertwined with his innovative ideas about physical exercise. The Latin saying *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body), quoted originally from Juvenal's *Satires*, was at the core of the movement he inspired. Jahn began to train schoolboys in gymnastics at a Berlin open area called Hasenheide in 1811.⁶

The remarkable success of Jahn's Turner movement became the reason for the first of a series of governmental efforts to suppress it. The Wartburg festival of 1817 was an event organized by students and their fraternities, but the Turners played an active part. The occasion was the 300-year anniversary of the posting of Luther's theses, and nationalistic speeches pleading for honor, freedom, and fatherland caused alarm in Prussian and Austrian government circles. Suspecting revolutionary motives in the *Turnverein* organizations, edicts demanded the closure of the spaces for Turner exercising, such as Berlin's Hasenheide. The Prussian king ordered the dissolution of all Turner societies.⁷

It took decades to recover. Restrictions became less insistent only in the 1840s, and new Turner societies were founded: in Königsberg (1842), Stuttgart (1843), Cologne (1843), Dresden (1844), and Kiel (1844). A communication network evolved through newsletters, and Turner "passports" enabled traveling members exchange of information. Records indicate a dramatic revival of about 300 Turner

⁶ By 1818 there were one hundred Turner societies with 6,000 members in Prussia alone. According to Jahn's estimate, the number of Turner societies in Germany was 150, with 12,000 members. Dieter Düding, *Organisierter gesellschaftlicher Nationalismus in Deutschland (1808–1847). Bedeutung und Funktion der Turner- und Sängervereine für die deutsche Nationalbewegung* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1984), 67. An earlier gymnastic exercise location in Schnepfenthal near Gotha could have anticipated Jahn's. Cf. Guts Muths, "Der Begründer des deutschen Turnwesens, und die Feier seines 100jährigen Geburtstags," *Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 844 (September 3, 1859), 149–51.

⁷ Düding, *Organisierter gesellschaftlicher Nationalismus*, 36 and 120–35.

societies with 80,000 members by the end of 1847. In that year the popular Turner festivals emerged again in Heidelberg and Frankfurt. After the outbreak of the revolution there were efforts to establish a common political agenda for the diverse Turner organizations, but dissension about their fundamental purpose developed. At the conference of Hanau in April of 1848 many conservatives insisted that the focus should be on physical fitness; radicals demanded political action. In a vote to make the struggle for a republic and democracy the primary aim of the Turners, the conservative members prevailed 91 to 81.⁸ The ambition to create a national union of Turners failed.

How did the revolutionary movement, in which the Turners actively participated, become a noteworthy force in the American political scene? It will become evident that in the public discourse of the 1850s the Forty-Eighters and Turners repeatedly drew on their experiences and the ideals that had inspired them. The example of the New York Turners is characteristic of a phenomenon that can be observed throughout the United States. Prominent members of the New York Turner Society, for example, Sigismund Kaufmann, Germain Metternich (not related to Prince Clemens Metternich), Eduard Müller, and Franz Sigel, had been revolutionary leaders in Germany. Metternich stands out as the oldest fighter—he had been imprisoned for his activism from 1832 to 1835.⁹ Even before the March revolution began, his speech at the Turners' meeting in Frankfurt articulated the goals of a necessary uprising, the struggle for “a free German republic and its union.” Metternich proposed a resolution that would state the political task of the Turners unmistakably: “Our goal is to free the fatherland from its servitude. We are strong enough to make Germany free.”¹⁰ Although most Turners were not prepared for his brand of radicalism, such powerful sentiments soon became widespread. When the revolution broke out weeks later, Metternich, holding the revolutionary black-red-gold flag, led a troop of Turners through the streets of Frankfurt.¹¹ But the revolution failed, and with the reaction there were warrants for arresting Metternich, Kaufmann, Müller, and Sigel, who were forced to flee for their lives. In New York they faced entirely new challenges, but just like as others in the rest of the country, they discovered that the foremost causes in America were not immune to an infusion of revolutionary spirit. This becomes most evident in the campaign to keep slavery out of Kansas.

When, how, and why did the German immigrant vote become crucial in Abraham Lincoln's political calculations? In Illinois, Lincoln became acquainted with a number of German revolutionaries. He knew and valued Friedrich Hecker as a political ally. He recognized in the Illinois *Staats-Zeitung*, published by George Schneider, a paper that could advance the Republican cause. Gustave Koerner, who had taken part in revolutionary activities in the 1830s, became a trusted adviser, and Koerner recalled that in Belleville, as well as in other places where he had spoken, Lincoln had found the Germans more enthusiastic than all other nationalities in the cause of freedom. The Belleville newspaper reported on that occasion that when Lincoln referred to the “great heart of Germany in America,” his audience

⁸ Ibid., 220–49

⁹ Richard Falck, *Germain Metternich. Ein Deutscher Freiheitskämpfer* (Mainz: Max Krause, 1954), 28–50.

¹⁰ Düding, *Organisierter gesellschaftlicher Nationalismus*, 292–95 (July 31–August 2, 1847).

¹¹ Falck, *Germain Metternich*, 56–59.

responded with “a thrill of sympathy and pleasure.”¹² There is a need to reconstruct the ways in which German enthusiasm in the cause of freedom made a difference in Lincoln’s political decisions.

The most dramatic evidence of Lincoln’s realization that the German votes were essential to the future of the Republican Party comes to light in his relationship with Dr. Theodore Canisius. A dedicated Turner, Canisius had come to Illinois with experience as a German revolutionary. Previously ignored correspondence shows that he had worked feverishly as a journalist to win Germans for the Republican Party. Lincoln recognized the importance of his efforts and made a secret agreement with him: If Canisius agreed to publish for the Republican Party in the 1860 campaigns, Lincoln would finance a German press for Canisius in Springfield. That press functioned to communicate Lincoln’s support for German concerns not only in Illinois but also throughout the country.

The view that “Lincoln would not have been elected if he had not had the wholehearted support of leaders among the Forty-Eighters” Lawrence S. Thompson and Frank X. Brown have called a legend. If that is true, the “legend” could have received a strong initial impetus from Villard’s article and then found elaboration in articles by Julius Goebel and William E. Dodd. Before Goebel and Dodd there was John Peter Altgeld, the first immigrant to be elected governor of Illinois and a politician on the national stage; he also overstated the case for German influence in the 1860 election.¹³ In general, the literature about Lincoln has not taken this “legend” seriously. The debate about the significance of the German factor has taken place in journals and books by scholars for German-American readers. It has not entered into the mainstream of Lincoln scholarship.

Joseph Schafer was one of the first to attack the foundations of this “legend.” He pointed out that the German-Americans did not vote as a block; he found evidence that in Wisconsin many tended to remain loyal to the Democratic Party. Thomas W. Kremm examined the voting records in Cleveland and found that there many Germans were Catholics, and they remained loyal to the Democratic Party.¹⁴ Articles by Walter Kamphoefner (1991), Lesley Ann Kawaguchi (1994), Richard H. Steckel (1998) have added further evidence that the German-Americans divided votes in a number of ways, according to their place of birth in Germany, religion, and subsequent residence in relation to the southern border.¹⁵

¹² Thomas J. McCormack, ed. *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner (1809–1896)* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1909), II, 33. *Belleville Weekly Advocate*, October 22, 1856, quoted in Roy P. Basler, ed. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), II, 379–80.

¹³ Lawrence S. Thompson and Frank X. Brown, “The Forty-Eighters in Politics,” in A. E. Zucker, *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 137–8. John Peter Altgeld, “The Immigrant’s Answer,” in Henry M. Christman, ed. *The Mind and Spirit of John Peter Altgeld* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 25–37. Altgeld’s article first appeared in *Forum* 7 (1890): 681–96.

¹⁴ Joseph Schafer, “Who Elected Lincoln?” In Luebke, ed. *Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln*, 46–61. Thomas W. Kremm, “Cleveland and the First Lincoln Election: The Ethnic Response to Nativism,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977): 69–86.

¹⁵ Walter D. Kamphoefner, “German-Americans and Civil War Politics: A Reconsideration of the Ethnocultural Thesis,” *Civil War History* 37 (1991): 232–43; Lesley Ann Kawaguchi, “Diverging Political Affiliations and Ethnic Perspectives: Philadelphia Germans and Antebellum Politics,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13 (1994): 3–29; Richard H. Steckel, “Migration and Political Conflict: Precincts in the Midwest on the Eve of the Civil War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28 (1998): 583–603.

These investigations, supported by statistical evidence, question the possibility of generalizations beyond any particular areas within individual states.

Even if the "legend" is not credible, it may still be instructive to examine the immigration history that contributed to it. The devil is in the details. Those details are geographical or chronological points, previously unaware of each other. They must be connected to be meaningful.

The relatively limited focus of this book is on the movement of the Turners and the Forty-Eighters; New York, Kansas, Iowa, Maryland, Indiana, and Illinois receive special attention. This focus allows the reader to follow a crucial line of development. The influence of German-Americans on the events of 1860 evolved in stages. This limitation may shed light on the most prominent leaders and their contributions to the political discourse. Admittedly, other narratives may highlight the strength of different factors, states, and political figures. This study can show, however, that the Turner movement benefited from a solid tradition and recent revolutionary experiences. The Turners had learned from Jahn the importance of personal and social commitment. The movement combined originality in organization with effective modes of communication. The Turners and the Forty-Eighters were prepared to contribute. A series of unpredictable and favorable circumstances in America provided the opportunity.

Numerous sources, especially those in the German language, have previously been overlooked in the narratives about Lincoln's nomination and election. The neglected details (translated from German in the accompanying Appendixes) open alternate ways to interpret nineteenth-century immigration history, including the importance of the Turners and the Forty-Eighters.

Members of the New York Turner Society introduced me to their valuable archives, which document the wide-ranging connections between the revolutions of 1848 and 1849 in Germany and the momentous political changes in the pre-Civil War era in America. Contacts and discussions with those members, Ernest Menze, Ferdinand Beinert, Peter Rohlf, Robert Rohlf, Hans Sammer, and Frank Wedl, laid the foundations for the present project and led to the search for additional resources to complement the picture nationally. Fortunately, the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Massachusetts had previously unnoticed issues of relevant newspapers, in particular, the key issues of the *Turn-Zeitung*, which first announced the Turner support for Abraham Lincoln. Visits to Widener Library at Harvard University, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the library of the Kansas State Historical Society, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library of Springfield proved fruitful. The unique online newspaper collection of the Kansas City Kansas Community College and of Territorial Kansas Online provided valuable access to German political events in Kansas. I owe a debt to scholars James Bergquist, Michael Burlingame, James Cornelius, George Jones, Wayne Kamphoefner, Nora Probst, David Smith, and Wayne Temple for valuable advice. I relied on critical input from friends, especially William Keel and Charles Reitz. Judith Arnold translated essential texts from German to English. A special note of gratitude is due to my wife, Betty Baron, who supported the project through its various stages with tolerance, patience, and invaluable advice.

I. The Radical Turners of New York

"[Sigismund Kaufmann's] name is indelibly linked with the history of the Turner Union and the Turner movement as one of the founders of the *New York Turnverein*. He was first chairman for many years. He was also one of the founders of the [national] Turner Union, whose chairman he became at that time." [Heinrich Metzner], "Sigismund Kaufmann," August 24, 1889

II. The Kansas Campaign

"There was in the action of those pioneers who left Boston and Worcester to settle in Kansas a moral grandeur that eclipsed anything in the history of emigration." Eli Thayer, *New York Times*, August 4, 1854

"[Kansas has been] settled against the South by immigration. J. H. Stringfellow, letter to the *Washington Union*, January 7, 1858

"The Germans are a power here. They are Republicans and it is their right to be fairly represented in the party." Champion Vaughan, Leavenworth *Daily Times*, September 4, 1858

III. The Movement against Immigrants

. . . the American [Know-Nothing] movement proposes to correct these evils and abuses by wise and humane legislation; to protect ourselves from the organized system in the Old World, which subjects us to the support of foreign paupers and the depredations of alien criminals; to thoroughly revise the naturalization laws. . . . Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, *The Campaign Bee*, October 1855

IV. Lincoln's Gamble for the German Immigrant Vote

"In 1854, the wheel of history turned. A train of events that mobilized the antislavery North resulted in the formation of the Republican Party and ultimately provided Lincoln's generation with a challenge equal to or surpassing that of the founding fathers." Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*

V. A Thwarted Movement and Lincoln's Nomination

"The thing [Lincoln's nomination] was well planned and boldly executed." Edward Bates, *Diary*, May 19, 1860

VI. Lincoln's Election

". . . in the late contest it may be well said that the voters of German extraction held the balance of power in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. In each of these states they numbered tens of thousands, and on whatever side they were to throw the whole

weight of their vote was sure to be the winning one.” Henry Villard, *New York Herald*, December 9, 1860

VII. Conclusions

“Lincoln himself had been willing to gamble on his chances of being nominated for the presidency as early as the spring of 1859. On May 30, 1859, he purchased through his friend Jacob Bunn the type and other equipment of *The Illinois Staats-Anzeiger*, a German language newspaper recently established in Springfield.” Harry E. Pratt, *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln*

VIII. Appendixes

- A. Felix Reifschneider, The New York Turner Society
- B. Engelhardt and Feigel, An Appeal to the Germans
- C. [Heinrich Metzner], Sigismund Kaufmann
- D. [Wilhelm Pfänder], Correspondence from Kansas
- E. [Hugo Tafel], The Turner Society of Leavenworth, Kansas (1857)
- F. [Hugo Tafel], The Turner Society of Leavenworth, Kansas (1858)
- G. The Canisius Correspondence
- H. Excerpt from Wilhelm Rapp's Letter to His Father, June 30, 1861
- I. [Wilhelm Rapp], The Edward Bates Candidacy, April 10, 1860
- J. An Appeal to the Turner Societies of the United States
- K. An Appeal to German Republicans
- L. The Republican Convention in Chicago, May 24, 1860
- M. The Republican Convention in Chicago, May 31, 1860
- N. The German Republican Newspapers of the United States
- O. [Henry Villard], Report on the Election

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