

Chapter Two: Historiography

Many Germans emigrated to the United States in the late 1840's thru the mid 1850's. These people left Germany during this time period for a variety of reasons. For many Germans, Wisconsin offered a desirable destination and location to start their new lives. This chapter will explore the various different reasons why Germans came to the United States, and specifically to Wisconsin.

Robert C. Nesbit, the author of Wisconsin: A History, stated, "The most careful student of German emigration finds it difficult to assign reasons for this outpouring of people."¹ Nesbit was correct in his assessment. The difficulty arose from the diversity of people that left Germany during 1848-1855. They differed in their regional, occupational, and religious backgrounds. Some were rural laborers, landowners, and farmers, while others were skilled workers, and intellectuals. Some immigrants were Catholic, others Protestant, and even a few Jewish. These characteristics made it easier to identify and interpret their reasons for leaving Germany.

The first Germans to appear in Wisconsin sought religious freedom. Nesbit wrote, "A congregation of German Old Lutherans from Freistadt arrived in 1839 and settled in Milwaukee and Mequon. There were about 500 of them and their main purpose

¹ Robert C. Nesbit, *Wisconsin: A History* (Madison, WI. : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 155.

was to escape a controversy within the church in which they found themselves a minority.”² No other material supported or refuted this fact so it was hard to ascertain whether the fact was true or not. An argument for the statement being accurate is that many groups of people came to America fleeing religious persecution and in search of the right to practice their religion freely. When placed in this type of context the small, the Old Lutheran migration of 1839 makes sense.

A rather large factor that contributed to German immigration was the lack of farming opportunities in the German States. Richard Zeitlin, author of Germans In Wisconsin, wrote, “German immigration to the United States in the 1800’s occurred in three major waves. The first came mainly from southwestern Germany in the years 1845-1855 and consisted of some 939,000 men, women, and children, 97 percent of whom came from the states Nassau, Hesse, the Rhineland, Pfalz, Baden, Wurttemberg, and Bavaria. Small, inefficient, overpopulated, and often mortgaged farms dominated these areas. Repeated crop failures and the potato blight made calamity all but certain.”³

Contributing to the plight of the German farmers were the overbearing landlords. Because the rural population had grown, landlords abused the rural population and reduced wages. “For centuries the social system of the Germanic regions remained feudalistic and unchanging. Farmers were virtually serfs to their overlords.”⁴ The landlords ruled many agricultural regions with iron fists. “The landlords tried to restrict the growing labor force by forbidding marriage, which they could do since they

² Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 155.

³ Richard H. Zeitlin, *Germans In Wisconsin* (Madison, WI. : State Historical Society of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 6.

⁴ Zeitlin, *Germans*, 6.

controlled the households of their dependants.”⁵ Eventually, the landlords favored the emigration of the landless dependants and the government supported the idea as well. For the immigrants who could afford to travel into the interior of the United States, southern Wisconsin was an ideal place to make a fresh start. Land was reasonably priced and the area offered similar climate, soil, and topography to that of their native Germany.

Another important economic reason led to more German immigration during 1845-1855. Zeitlin argued that the problem with the German economy was indirectly related to the French Revolution of 1789, combined with the population problem. “The French Revolution of 1789, with its liberating ideals, abolished the rigid system in much of Europe and led to changes that set the stage for the eventual migrations.”⁶

Industrialization, the rise of capitalism, crop failure, and overpopulation had displaced many farmers and artisans. As mentioned before, farmers were in a bad situation, and many products that had previously been made by artisans were now being produced cheaper in factories, leaving the farmers and artisans in an idle state. The ever-growing population was another factor. “Germany had what Friederich List called a “dwarf economy,” one which could not support its growing population.”⁷ Between the years 1846 and 1853, Germany was burdened by “a 38-percent increase in birth rate”⁸, a major factor causing German landlords attempted to control marriage on lands that they oversaw. Too many displaced persons who for the reasons previously mentioned formed

⁵ Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 156.

⁶ Zeitlin, *Germans*, 6.

⁷ Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 156.

⁸ Zeitlin, *Germans*, 6.

a large portion of the proletariat, not a working class, remained idle and unneeded, giving them a perfect reason to leave Germany and seek their fortunes in The United States.

The most famous group of people to leave Germany in the late 1840's were known as the "Forty-Eighters". This group of German immigrants considered themselves "freethinkers" and consisted of "intellectuals, radicals, religious dissidents, advocates of Free Thought, and reformers of all kinds."⁹ These people, in effect, were political refugees and had migrated to the United States after the German Revolution of 1848 failed to procure the democratic changes in Germany that they desired. The German Revolution of 1848 derived from many problems that had plagued Germany for some time. By the late 1840's, the effects of both the industrial and French (1789) Revolutions had come to a head in Germany. The tension between the lower classes the bourgeoisie, and the noblemen had reached the boiling point. The Revolution of 1848 was a social revolution: a movement of repressed peasants, of a rising middle class, and of an exploited urban proletariat.¹⁰ Radical, democratic ideals had been festering in Germany, taken from the French Revolution of 1789. These radical ideas reached the surface and many liberals (especially those in southern Germany) began to demand reforms. These radical looked to the United States as a model and desired a united Germany, governed by a constitution.

Two important reformers in the southern part of Germany were two Mannheim lawyers, Peter Sturve and Frederick Hecker. By 1848, these two men had been working together for some time and demanded a variety of reforms:

⁹ Zeiltin, *Germans*, 6.

¹⁰ Gerard Rempel, *1848: Revolution and Reaction*, <http://mars.acnet.wnec.edu/gempel/courses/germany/lectures/081848.html>

1. universal arming of the populace;
2. freely elected parliaments;
3. universal suffrage;
4. freedom of the press, religion, conscience and teaching;
5. trial by jury;
6. universal German citizenship;
7. just taxation;
8. universal instruction;
9. protection of labor and the right to work;
10. adjustments of capital vis-à-vis labor;
11. popular and economic administration;
12. responsibilities of ministers and all officials;
13. abolition of all privileges;
14. a national militia;
15. a national assembly.

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As the list above shows, the demands made by Sturve and Hecker are similar to the rights and privileges guaranteed to United States citizens by the Constitution. When the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, heard of the radicals' demands for reforms and a constitution, "he swore that no mere piece of paper would come between him and

¹¹ Rempel, *Revolution*, 1.

the Lord God.” The paragraphs of a constitution could not replace the old loyalties, the king thought.”¹²

Mannheim and Hecker were the first to organize radicals in Baden. They presented their demands to the government but failed to accomplish much. Because of their radical actions, both Mannheim and Hecker had to leave Germany, and ended up in the United States.

The radical movement in Berlin was more organized than the revolt led by Mannheim and Hecker. The radicals in Berlin concerned themselves with improving the working class, who had been forced to take action due to the economic crisis along with widespread unemployment. Stephan Born became the main leader of the revolution in Berlin. Born was influenced by Karl Marx, who along with Engels had just written their famous Communist Manifesto. Born and Marx agreed that “workers must organize in order to assert their powers.”¹³ However organized, Born had problems relaying his message to the workers, and he later moved to Leipzig.

As the months of 1848 wore on, massive demonstrations and skirmishes with authority occurred all over Germany. In mid-March, 1848, angry mobs gathered around the Prussian Royal Palace in Berlin. The King, not willing to make concessions to the mobs of his people, sent the troops into the streets and several people died. After pressure the rioting and advice from his counsel, King Wilhelm IV called back the troops and agreed to listen seriously to the demands of the people. Soon after most of the violence had passed, the Revolution began to become more political than social.

¹² Rempel, *Revolution*, 1.

¹³ Rempel, *Revolution*, 2.

The first concession of the royals was allowing a general election based on universal suffrage. However, “When the first national German election took place, unrestricted suffrage was carried out only in Austria, Prussia, Hesse-Denmark, Schleswig-Holstein, Brunswick, and Nassau.”¹⁴ The victors of these elections now formed the National Assembly that convened in St. Andrews Church on May 18, 1848. The majority of the National Assembly was made up of academic types who unfortunately were not very practical politicians. “Some of the delegates can be described in terms of their political factions:

1. Right Wing was made up of mostly Austrians (40) and Prussian Officials (122).
2. Right Center contained mostly academics and representatives from the North (40).
3. Left Center was made up of younger, southern representatives championing popular sovereignty and constitutional monarchy (132).
4. Left Wing (56).
5. Extreme Left Wing, or Democratic Party (47).

The National Assembly faced many problems. The first occurred when a separate Czech Congress was established in Prague. The formation of this government shocked the National Assembly and was swiftly crushed by aggressive Austrian forces. The next problem came when there was a nationalist Polish uprising in German territory. The Prussian Army was called upon to end the affair. Throughout 1848 and into 1849, the National Assembly struggled to adopt a constitution that would unite all of Germany. In March 1849 the Assembly accomplished their goal and created a constitution not totally

¹⁴ Rempel, *Revolution*, 4.

dissimilar from that of the United States. When the delegates sent the constitution to the various German states for ratification, Austria, Bavaria, and Hanover rejected it. With the three dissenting states standing firm, the idea of a united Germany failed. Outside of a few isolated uprisings in support of the constitution, the German Revolution was over, with the right wing political factions and monarchy having regained control, whether voluntarily or forcefully. “With the collapse of the liberal movement, so fatefully for the German world, a large number of revolutionists migrated to the United States, many with prison sentences, or worse, hanging over their heads.”¹⁵

In Revolution and Reaction, Rempel identified three major reasons why the German Revolution of 1848 failed. First, he argues that the National Assembly was made up of mainly academics that were too inept and narrow minded politically to ever agree on the issues that they confronted. Secondly, Rempel claims that “the German Liberals did not have a sufficiently large following among the people.”¹⁶ Finally, Rempel pinned the blame on Prussia and Austria, stating that, “the people in these countries were simply propagandized to believe that they did not have any political talent. Decisions had to be made for them.”¹⁷ Karl Marx charged that the Revolution failed because the National Assembly failed to face Germany’s social problems, and concentrated on the political issue of adopting a national constitution.

Because of the failure of the German Revolution of 1848, Rempel and Wittke claimed many people fled westward, including the Forty-Eighters. In contrast, Wittke

¹⁵ Carl Wittke, *The German Forty-Eighters In America: A Centennial Appraisal*, *The American Historical Review*, (The American Historical Association, 1948) 712.

¹⁶ Rempel, *Revolution*, 6.

¹⁷ Rempel, *Revolution*, 6.

admitted, "It would be misleading to say that the majority in the tidal wave of German immigration to America in the last half of the nineteenth century were intellectuals, university graduates, professional men, or members of the higher classes. They were not."¹⁸ *Wisconsin: A History* author Robert Nesbit probably would have agreed with Wittke and wrote that, "Only a small fraction of German Immigration can be identified with the abortive Revolution of 1848, although Carl Schurz and his fellow émigrés made themselves legion with their literary efforts."¹⁹ Richard Zeitlin wrote, "Many of them (the German Forty-Eighters) settled in Milwaukee, or within the city's growing orbit, and were later to play important roles in politics, government, and organized labor.

Unquestionably, the most eminent figure from the German Forty-Eighters that settled in Wisconsin was Carl Schurz. Schurz was born in Liblar, a village near Cologne, on March 2, 1829. "While a student in Bonn, Schurz joined what would become the German revolutionary movement of 1848. He participated in the rebellions in the Rhineland, the Palatinate, and in Baden."²⁰ After the Revolution of 1848 fizzled out, Schurz escaped to America and eventually made his way to Watertown, WI., where he settled down to become a farmer in 1855. Soon after, young Carl was admitted to the bar to practice law. In his early days of practice, Schurz became an ardent supporter of the fledgling Republican Party, actively campaigning for Abraham Lincoln in the Midwestern States. After the election of 1860, Lincoln rewarded Schurz with an appointment as U. S. envoy to Spain. Soon after the Civil War commenced, Schurz

¹⁸ Wittke, *Forty-Eighters*, 712.

¹⁹ Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 155.

²⁰ "Schurz, Carl (1829-1906)," *German American Corner*, Davitt Publications: <http://www.germanheritage.com/biographies/mtoz/schurz.html> (2 Dec. 2004).

resigned his post as envoy to Spain and returned home to Wisconsin where he gained an appointment as Commander of the 26th Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment. The 26th Wisconsin was a mainly German unit that saw much action, including the Battle of Gettysburg. After the Civil War, Carl Schurz was far from done with his service to his adopted country. He later served one term in the U.S. Senate and then as Ulysses S. Grant's Interior Secretary. In his later years, Carl Schurz moved to New York City, "where he helped found the New York Evening Post."²¹ Later Schurz wrote editorials for Harper's Weekly. To this day Carl Schurz is remembered for not only his status as a member of the German Forty-Eighters, but as a true American patriot and political reformer

Many other Germans made their ways to Wisconsin in the years that followed in 1855. In fact, "by 1885, about one third of Wisconsin's population was of German background."²² Among the many German Immigrants that were living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1885 was Bernhard Eiring, who at the age of forty-three had already lived a most eventful life to that point of time.

²¹ Corner, 3.

²² Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 155.