

FEATURED REVIEW

The Great Disappearing Act: Germans in New York City, 1880–1930

By Christina A. Ziegler-McPherson. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022. Pp. vii + 225. Paperback \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1978823181.

Philadelphia’s Germans: From Colonial Settlers to Enemy Aliens

By Richard N. Juliani. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. v + 327. Cloth \$120.00. ISBN: 978-1793651792.

Germans in America: A Concise History

By Walter D. Kamphoefner. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. Pp. vii + 301. Cloth \$38.00. ISBN: 978-1442264977.

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Immigrants from German-speaking regions have been coming to North America since the late 1600s. Scores of historians have studied the reasons for their leaving, the factors that pulled them across the Atlantic, and the complex adjustment process to a new environment. The three books under review offer additional insights to the history of German Americans. Individually, these books focus on New York City, Philadelphia, and the nation as a whole. The authors demonstrate that German Americans were not a homogeneous ethnic block with predictable behavior but, instead, varied by regional background, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic status; voted according to their personal interests; and constructed an ethnic identity based on the notion that they could be American and German at the same time. Collectively, these three studies strengthen the current historiographical consensus that World War I was one contributing factor, but not the primary one, in weakening distinct German characteristics of identity. They also agree that German immigrants and American-born individuals of German parentage or grand-parentage had contributed to that decline before the war by melding their cultural and social habits with American traits. At the same time, Anglo-Americans incorporated German characteristics into their culture. The authors successfully demonstrate that this acculturation process was complex and varied by region, religion, and economic context. More importantly, these books illustrate that the history of German Americans remains a field worthy of study.

The Great Disappearing Act: Germans in New York City, 1880–1930 and *Philadelphia’s Germans: From Colonial Settlers to Enemy Aliens* are regional studies that use a chronological approach and cover a similar time period. Christina Ziegler-McPherson focuses on the Lower East

Side of New York City, known as *Kleindeutschland*, or little Germany. She asserts that the once distinct and thriving German-American community had been melting into American society by the early twentieth century and by 1930 had in essence disappeared. Initially, German speakers, who brought old dislikes from the German states, grouped together by regional origin and religion, and established subcommunities within the area. German-American-owned shops, banks, taverns, theaters, churches, synagogues, biergartens, singing societies, schools, and associations (*Vereine*) catered to their everyday economic and social needs and preserved the German character of the community. Anglo-Americans viewed them as a homogeneous group, but Germans preserved religious, social, and economic distinctions. For example, German Jews did not experience antisemitism exclusively from Anglo-Americans because Germans of other religious faiths also excluded them from cultural and social organizations. German Americans of all socioeconomic backgrounds in New York City participated in the political process by supporting either the Democratic or the Republican Party based on a variety of personal interests, especially alcohol-related issues, or to challenge the Tammany Hall political machine. They were voters as well as candidates for elected city, state, or national office.

Preservation of the German language was crucial to maintaining culture, however, children whose parents could not afford to send them to private school where instruction was in German, were the first to be exposed to English and American traits in public schools. By 1880, the first signs of the disappearance of Germanness became visible as second- or third-generation German Americans became more socially and economically upwardly mobile and moved away from *Kleindeutschland*. Interestingly, as German Americans increasingly lost the ability to speak good German by 1900 and began to celebrate American holidays in addition to German festivals, organizations like the National German-American Alliance and individual writers such as Carl Wilhelm Schlegel also emphasized and promoted the contributions Germans made to American history, economy, and society. At the same time, Americans also adopted German foods, including hot dogs, lager beer, and pretzels, decorated Christmas trees, and conducted Easter egg hunts, but these changes were more subtle, according to the author. Within this context of merging cultures, German Americans had become comfortable with having a dual identity in what they perceived to be a pluralistic American society.

Ziegler-McPherson addresses an incident in New York history, the sinking of the steamboat *General Slocum* in 1904 and the death of 1,021 people, most of whom were members of the St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church. The myth associated with the tragedy was that it was the reason *Kleindeutschland* disappeared. As the author points out, reality was quite different and more complex. Most German Americans, especially descendants of immigrants who had arrived two or three generations previously, had already moved to other boroughs. Members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, by contrast, were recent immigrants and their American-born children. Furthermore, *Kleindeutschland* had become more diversified as East European Jews and Italians had also moved to the neighborhood. More importantly, most of the survivors and families of the deceased remained in the Lower East Side, began to marry into other ethnic groups and became bilingual, thus adjusting to America through a somewhat different process than previous German immigrants. Finally, divisions within the St. Mark's congregation over how to spend relief funds related to the accident also fractured the community and contributed to its demise.

External pressures and anti-German sentiment during World War I were important factors that contributed to the abandonment of German culture, but the author also blames German Americans for influencing American perceptions of German speakers as not being true Americans. German Americans thought they could maintain aspects of their German culture, such as language and alcohol consumption on Sunday, while also embracing American economic and political practices in pluralistic fashion. Anglo-Americans, however, disagreed and insisted on assimilation to the American way of life as they defined it,

including the abandonment of the German language. Thus, World War I further contributed to the gradual disappearance of a distinct Germanness which was already under way.

Ziegler-McPherson's evaluation of German Americans during the 1920s reveals that several German cultural organizations had survived, but the institutions that German Americans had viewed as crucial for survival in the 1870s had now become a matter of nostalgia, something to participate in occasionally but no longer essential to one's identity. German Americans had become one of several ethnic groups which participated in New York City's social life and were as religiously, politically, and socially diverse as ever. German Americans thus represented the assimilation process many immigrants experience. They initially grouped together to seek support in a strange environment, but as they became economically stable and progressed in social status, they moved to express their improved living circumstances. Yet, by introducing new foods, holiday practices, and leisure habits, Germans also changed American culture. The author concludes that the combination of the American push for assimilation during World War I and German influence on American identity over several decades resulted in the absorption of Germanness into American society or its virtual disappearance by 1930.

While *The Great Disappearing Act* focuses on German history in a small section of New York City between 1880 and 1930, *Philadelphia's Germans* studies the German experience from colonial days through the end of World War I, not just in Philadelphia but also most of Pennsylvania and other surrounding states. The book's first chapter is a rather brief summary of German history in Pennsylvania, ranging from initial arrival in 1693, to what was one of the most ethnically diverse British colonies on the North American continent, to the end of the American Civil War. Richard Juliani is not entirely clear whether Philadelphia's Germans lived in an ethnic enclave during the 1700s, but he notes them as dispersed throughout the city based on socioeconomic status by the mid-1800s. The author mentions the presence of opposition to German speakers by such colonial notables as Benjamin Franklin but does not discuss the nativist 1850s. Although German Americans volunteered for military service in the Continental Army during the American War for Independence and served honorably on the side of the Union during the Civil War, Anglo-Americans still viewed them with suspicion because of their dual identity of being both American and German. The Peace Festival in May 1871 that celebrated the newly unified German Empire with a parade which included every German association in Philadelphia only confirmed these Anglo-American misgivings.

Unlike Ziegler-McPherson, who addressed the diversification of Germans and continued arrival of German immigrants during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a time of transition in one chapter, Juliani breaks up this period into individual chapters and decades but offers similar thematic information about socioeconomic and political divergence. He justifies this by arguing that between 1871 and 1882 the largest number of German immigrants arrived in the United States, lured by free land through the Homestead Act, guidebooks about Philadelphia, and information learned through letters from acquaintances already in America. While German Americans assisted the newcomers with finding work and housing as well as learning English through their network of associations, including the German Society of Pennsylvania, the newcomers also brought different political and religious habits. Juliani explains that with the arrival of new immigrants, Germans were no longer acting as a reliable Republican voting block. They, instead, supported candidates more aligned with their personal economic and social interests. New arrivals, who had experienced economic change in Germany and persecution for their more radical ideals, were also more eager to participate in the American labor struggle for improved workplaces, shorter workdays, and better wages by joining the Knights of Labor, the United German Trades, or the German Federation of Trades. Labor activism carried over into the political realm as workers aimed to achieve their demands by supporting the German-American Republican League, the German Socialist Party, the Central Democratic German Campaign Club, or the Socialist Labor Party.

Despite such divisions, Germans continued to publicly celebrate their festivals, choir competitions, and sporting events, but their consumption of beer at these social events on Sundays also attracted the attention of temperance advocates who supported restrictive Sunday liquor laws and attempted to impose their own moral code on others, especially foreigners. Germans, especially those who had lived in Philadelphia for generations, countered by arguing that as American citizens they had liberties that others could not deny them, and established the Personal Liberty League.

The author's considerable use of newspapers results in a good measure of what Philadelphians of all ethnic backgrounds read and knew. These papers illustrate that the dual identity of German Americans was most visible during the first decade of the 1900s. Advertised festivities, such as the annual German Day, focused on celebrating the contributions of Philadelphia Germans to American society. Church announcements showed that Lutheran ministers and German Catholic priests continued to offer sermons in German. American scholars and public opinion defined German Americans as a hardworking, thrifty, and desirable people, even if they continued to celebrate their past. Germans who had lived in Philadelphia for generations acted as and appeared to be American, however, the continued arrival of immigrants, including persons from East and South Europe, also heightened American calls for regulations and restrictions, because Americans viewed these foreigners as a threat to American culture. Within this debate over the newcomers, Americans also viewed the maintenance of German habits by Americans of German extraction as negative.

In the years just prior to World War I, Philadelphia's Germans continued to celebrate their contributions to America through the annual German Day, but this was also a time of heightened Anglo-American rhetoric about the need for immigrants to eliminate their dual, or hyphenated, identities and to fully Americanize. Juliani convincingly argues that the concept of hyphenation, especially the dual ethnic identity of German Americans, morphed into the term "alien enemy" during World War I despite widespread pledges of loyalty by Philadelphia's Germans. In part inspired by British propaganda but mostly stimulated by unreasonable fear, Anglo-Americans viewed increased numbers of citizenship applications as a ruse to cover up spy activities and sabotage plots. Calls for government protection of war industry and military installations resulted in federal legislation that established protective zones from which foreigners were excluded, required the registration of men and women originally from the Central Powers who had not yet become citizens, authorized the confiscation of their property, and censored the German-language press by requiring translations of any article related to the government and the war effort.

Geographic context and concerning events only heightened fears. Like New York City, Philadelphia is near the Atlantic Ocean and its manufacturing sector included munition plants. An explosion at the Eddystone Ammunition Corporation in April 1917, which resulted in more than 130 deaths was immediately attributed to German sabotage activities without much further investigation. Additional explosions at the Frankford Arsenal near a heavily German populated area were also blamed on enemy activities despite investigation results to the contrary. Such incidents only heightened suspicions of German speakers and resulted in further restrictions for German Americans.

Juliani selected Philadelphia as a research project because it was the headquarters of the National German-American Alliance, an umbrella organization for all cultural associations that celebrated German history and German contributions to American society. Its presence became a particular focus for expressions of anti-German sentiment during World War I. Senate hearings in early 1918 alleged that the Alliance hindered assimilation, opposed prohibition, disagreed with American war efforts, and conducted propaganda on behalf of Germany. Revoking its congressional charter in spring 1918 was the easiest way to eliminate the organization, its suspected subversive behavior, and its perceived threat to Anglo-American culture. As the author correctly asserts, this congressional action occurred at the apex of the anti-German frenzy, when German-American leaders decided to give in to the demands to assimilate. Before Congress could conclude its actions in 1918, the executive

committee of the Alliance voted to dissolve the organization and donated all remaining funds to the American Red Cross.

Juliani argues that Americanization efforts, such as renaming streets or businesses and stopping the teaching of German in schools, had limited impact. With the end of the war, restrictive zones disappeared, orchestras again played German-composed music, ministers again offered German sermons, and within a few years German was again a subject that students learned in school. Philadelphia's Germans also successfully revived efforts to honor one of the founders of the city's Germantown, Francis Daniel Pastorius, with a monument that was revealed in November 1920. Juliiani concludes that Philadelphia's Germans had a long history in Pennsylvania as an accepted ethnic group and a celebrated hard-working people, but World War I required them to rethink their dual identity of being American while also being German. Although Americans quickly changed the focus of their attention from Germans to radicals and immigrants in general during the 1920s, the war nevertheless had a lasting impact. Most German Americans were already more American than German but, most importantly, they were a diverse people. According to Juliiani, that diverse German-American identity could reawaken after World War II, when it would be alright again to celebrate one's ancestral history.

The third book under review, *Germans in America: A Concise History*, is very different from the above studies. Walter Kamphoefner, who has written about and taught the subject for forty years, uses his expertise to take a national look at the history of German Americans and synthesizes existing regional studies in order to provide a broader understanding of their place in American history. Instead of the other two books' chronological approach, this book uses a thematic method, including chapters on religion, education, the German-language press, and women. Kamphoefner also brings to life the experiences of German Americans through their own words expressed in letters that he and other scholars have collected over several decades and turned into a collection of letters from immigrants to North America, or the Nordamerika-Auswandererbriefsammlung, at the Forschungsbibliothek in Gotha, Germany. By focusing on both sides of the Atlantic, Kamphoefner strengthens the argument that German immigrants were not a homogenous group but very diverse in their geographic, religious, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds. This diversity influenced their migration choices, adjustment processes to the new environment, and degrees of preservation of German cultural habits. Quotes from the letters demonstrate the existence of the chain migration network that most Germans used and illustrate that the migrants knew someone who was already in the United States before departing their homeland. Finally, Kamphoefner updates several misconceptions about the history of Germans in North America and provides evidence that German Americans, especially those living in rural areas, maintained their ability to speak German beyond three generations, the time period of adjustment most historians assert is necessary for immigrants to fully integrate into a new environment. Thus, Kamphoefner achieves his goal of debunking several wide-held clichés about German Americans, including those held by German Americans themselves. This book will appeal to ordinary readers, including undergraduate students, who are interested in the history of German Americans but do not have the necessary background knowledge.

Unlike Juliiani, who very briefly touches on pre-nineteenth-century German immigration to North America, Kamphoefner offers the reader additional valuable details, such as the different experiences between the Germans belonging to smaller sects (Amish, Mennonites), who escaped religious persecution and the Germans belonging to major churches (Lutherans, Catholics, Reformed, Moravians), who often left their homes owing to a combination of religious, economic, and political circumstances. Many of these German speakers preferred Pennsylvania as their destination, but they could be found in several of the British colonies. They traveled as family or village groups, often settling near each other, and more than half of the approximately 100,000 Germans who arrived during the colonial era came as redemptioners, or contract laborers who worked for three to six years for the

person who paid their passage. Despite misgivings by notable Americans about their persistent use of the German language, most colonists appreciated their industriousness. Kamphoefner demystifies the rumor that Congress almost adopted German as the official language of the United State but for one vote, that of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Frederick Muhlenberg, himself a German American. Instead, the vote was actually about translating government documents into German. Furthermore, the population numbers never justified the official language question. Kamphoefner concludes that, unless religion defined one's identity, most of the early German immigrants had assimilated to the American way of life and become bilingual before the next major immigration wave began in 1830.

The chapter on the reasons why Germans emigrated during the nineteenth century expertly summarizes the various push factors from Germany and pull factors to the United States as well as migration flows and ebbs. These included famine, crop failures, political revolutions, wage differentials, anti-immigration nativism during the 1850s, the American Civil War, periodic economic downturns in the United States in the 1870s, and general economic improvement in Germany in the 1890s. Quotes from letters help the reader understand the complex and personal decision-making processes associated with migration. Kamphoefner convincingly argues that scholars have given too much credence to the influence of guidebooks and emigration societies in convincing or enticing Germans to leave their homes. Instead, he argues that individuals made decisions based on information learned through letters from a person already living in America. These letters provided advice about shipping agents, land prices, employment opportunities, hardships during economic downturns, and who among friends and family should or should not undertake the voyage. This correspondence contributed to the chain migration of several individuals or families from a village or county in Germany, who then settled near each other in the United States. Knowing someone in the destination country also eased the shock of encountering a new environment.

Kamphoefner also clarifies the misconception that many German immigrants arrived in the United States to escape religious persecution. Instead, he argues, economics were the primary reason for most. Furthermore, religious diversity, ranging from Lutheran to Catholic, Jewish to Free Thinking, as well as conversion to American faiths that resulted in German Methodist and German Baptist congregations, encouraged divisions within the German ethnic group and disagreement with other ethnic groups of the same faith. Interestingly, efforts to preserve the German language as a subject taught in schools could surmount these fissures and initiate inter-ethnic cooperation.

The author elaborates on the perception of Germans as successful farmers and entrepreneurs. Many were, indeed, prosperous farmers but not because they had a unique German talent. Instead, they took advantage of the opportunities for landownership in America, brought in harvests through hard work without having to share the yield with a landowner as in the old world, and used the newest technology, as the United States developed into an industrial powerhouse. Germans also used these economic changes to enter the industrial sector, where they dominated in several trades, including brewing, meat production, and manufacturing of musical instruments. German immigrants who had a good education or had learned a trade were likely to succeed as entrepreneurs, initially by producing for their ethnic group, but eventually also by expanding into the larger American market. Kamphoefner suggests that more study is necessary to determine why and under what circumstances Germans came to dominate sectors of the American economy, such as the chemical industry and metallurgical trades, as became clear during World War I.

Readers will find the brief chapter on women and women's work most interesting. Unlike Anglo-American women who were more focused on the domestic sphere, German women, especially those from rural, poor areas in Germany, worked in the fields alongside their husbands to assure success. Single female immigrants often began their lives in America as domestic servants, and the daughters as well as granddaughters of German immigrants

who settled in rural areas worked as domestics in cities for several years before returning to the farm to get married. Other female occupations included midwife, participant in small business, and saloonkeeper. As Kamphoefner points out, most first- and second-generation German-American women continued to accept traditional patriarchal guidelines, married within the ethnic group, and, with some notable exceptions, were rarely active in the female suffrage movement.

Kamphoefner also updates the assertion that German immigrants were ardent Lincoln Unionist, outspoken opponents of slavery, and wholehearted Republicans. The arrival of over one million Germans during the 1850s, who held various political beliefs ranging from conservatism to freethinking, complicated political trends in Midwestern states where the majority of them settled. By explaining the context of the nativist presence in political parties, the temperance presence in the Protestant-led Anglo-American reform movement which included abolitionism, and political maneuvers by Republicans to get votes, Kamphoefner helps the reader gain a better understanding of German-American ideology. Religious determinism was not a factor in political choices. For example, Catholic Germans often supported the Democratic Party for its pro-immigrant stance, but could also vote for anti-slavery Republicans. Location was also a factor, as evidenced through persistent German support for Democratic candidates in Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin. By contrast, Republicans were more successful in gaining German votes in Illinois, Minnesota, and Missouri. The majority of Germans, indeed, supported the Union during the Civil War, but some also resisted conscription laws, the actual number of German unionists varied by state, and a few also joined the Confederacy. The influence of St. Louis Germans in keeping Missouri in the Union, however, has been only slightly overstated, according to the author.

The chapter on World War I reveals a very complex picture of the German-American experience and is based on the most recent scholarship. German Americans initially insisted on neutrality. When the United States entered the conflict, they expressed their loyalty to America and served in the military at numbers only slightly below the national average but higher than those of most ethnic groups. While widespread anti-German sentiment contributed to the renaming of several towns and streets, it did not deter a number of German-American soldiers from writing letters home in German despite military censorship. The lynching of Robert Prager, the most extreme example of the treatment of German immigrants during the war, appears to have been also an expression of anti-socialism, and the presence of German Americans as leaders of the crowd that conducted the lynching suggests the opportunity to settle scores during labor unrest in southwest Illinois. Kamphoefner concludes that although “the war certainly had an impact on the survival of the German language and culture in the United States, this impact was far from universal, and it merely accelerated trends that were already under way” before the war broke out (261).

In his concluding chapter, Kamphoefner addresses the rise of Hitler in Germany, German-American reactions to these developments, and their service during World War II. He argues that, within the context of the Cold War and improved relations between the United States and West Germany, German Americans again became interested in their ethnic heritage. This contributed to the establishment of the sister city program between the two countries, ethnic tourism, and the reconnection of family ties that had been severed for generations. As of the publication date of *Germans in America*, some German Americans can still speak the German language because their families still transmit it at home.

The works by Christina Ziegler-McPherson, Richard Juliani, and Walter Kamphoefner demonstrate that the subjects of German immigration, ethnic identity formation, and the impact of anti-German sentiment during World War I remain subjects worthy of investigation and open to interpretation. All three books are based on intensive research in primary documents, including government reports, newspapers, and letters. They revise several misconceptions previous scholars ascribed to German immigrants and explain the nuances

of the complex adjustment process to a new environment. *The Great Disappearing Act* and *Philadelphia's Germans* are excellent regional studies and hopefully will encourage others to investigate the history of Germans in other cities and states, and *Germans in America* is a timely and necessary publication that provides a general summary of German history in the United States.