

The Ohio Germans in the Civil War

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Dr. Don Heinrich Tolzmann is the author and editor of numerous books on German-American history and culture. He has received many awards, including Germany's Federal Cross of Merit, the Ohioana Book Award, the Distinguished German-American of the Year Award, and the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Society for German-American Studies. He served as Curator of the German-Americana Collection and Director of German-American Studies at the University of Cincinnati, and is currently President of the German-American Citizens League of Greater Cincinnati and Curator of its German Heritage Museum. He also is Historian for the Covington-Cincinnati Bridge Committee and the Steuben Society of America. He is Book Review Editor for German Life Magazine, and was Ohio Editor for the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung, and a columnist for the Amerika-Woche. He also is on the editorial board of the Yearbook of German-American Studies and The Palatine Immigrant, and has edited a monographic series, *Neue Deutsch-Amerikanische Studien/New German-American Studies* (34 vols.). He also has assisted in the production of several PBS programs, including "The German-Americans," and "Zinzinnati Reflections."

Introduction

By 2010, the U.S. was making plans for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, which was widely commemorated from 2011 to 2015. The Ohio Historical Society maintained a website focusing on the anniversary, and requested a contribution from me. I responded with an essay on "The Ohio Germans in the Civil War," which got quite a few responses, and invitations to speak on that topic. Now that the anniversary has come and gone, the site is no longer available, so I thought it would be informative to revisit what I wrote, and take a look at recent publications that have appeared since that time dealing with the Ohio Germans in the Civil War. My essay comes first, followed by a review of works on the topic.

Germans in the Civil War (2010 Essay)

In the 1990s I saw Ken Burns' PBS film "The Civil War" but was disappointed that no mention was made of German-Americans, especially the many German regiments that fought in the Union Army. (1) I felt this was mainly due to the fact that the major book on the topic, which was published by Wilhelm Kaufmann in 1911, was in German and had never been translated. (2)

Although my research and publications had not focused on the German participation in the Civil War, I was quite familiar with German-language sources on the topic, which I had reviewed while completing work on the *Catalog of the German-Americana Collection, University of Cincinnati*. (3) Earlier, I had also provided reference assistance to Frederic

Trautmann for his translated edition of Constantin Grebner's history of the Ninth Regiment, O.V.I. (4) So, I had a good grasp of the topic and the sources.

After viewing Ken Burns' film, it seemed a worthwhile project to bring out a translation of Kaufmann's work, and then work on publications dealing with the Ohio Germans. After discussing the matter with colleagues, I decided to assemble a team to work on the Kaufmann project, and this resulted in the publication of his history in 1999 as *Germans in the American Civil War*. (5)

Kaufmann was the editor of a German newspaper in Cleveland. (6) His Civil War history had previously appeared in serial form in more than 80 German-American papers across the country. As a result, Kaufmann received a great deal of correspondence from German-American Civil War veterans, making

his book a gold mine of information on the topic. It also includes an extensive biographical directory of more than five hundred German-American officers. According to Kaufmann and other sources, one-third of Union troops were German-American, either German- or American-born, a research finding that is generally unknown. (7)



Lt. Col. Gustav Tafel
courtesy of the Author

Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War

With the 150th anniversary of the Civil War approaching, my concern again is that the role of German-Americans will be overlooked so I am translating another important work on the topic: Gustav Tafel's history of the Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War. (8)

When President Lincoln called for volunteer regiments to protect the Union, Germans from Cincinnati were eager to enlist. Gustav Tafel (1830-1908) wrote a history about this in 1901 as a chapter in a German-language history of the Cincinnati Germans. Like Kaufmann's work, it never had been translated, so I decided to take the project on. What I like about Tafel's work is that it is by a Civil War veteran who is quite familiar with what he is talking about.

Tafel belonged to the 48er generation that came to America as a result of the 1848 Revolution in Germany. In Cincinnati he co-founded the first Turnverein and helped organize the 9th O.V.I., known as a Turner regiment. This was a German regiment that fought at Rich Mountain, Shiloh, Tullahoma, Corinth, Chickamauga, and elsewhere. Tafel also was appointed commander of the 106th O.V.I. and, later on, served as mayor of Cincinnati. (9)

Tafel's history tells us that the Cincinnati Germans not only formed several German regiments, but also formed companies in non-German units. For example, Cincinnati's 10th O.V.I. was formed by Irish-Americans, but also had two German companies.

"Dutch Devils"

Due to their tenacity in battle, the German regiments were known as the "Dutch devils" among Confederate forces. Robert E. Lee was even reported to have said, "Take the Dutch out of the Union Army and we could whip the Yankees easily." (10) German regiments were formed elsewhere in Ohio and it would be interesting to see translations done of their histories if they can be located. Some of them might not be in book form, but in the pages of the German-language press of Ohio. I would be interested in finding out about any other German-language regimental histories in need of translation, or of Civil War letters and diaries in German as well.

Conclusion (2019)

Appearing almost simultaneously with my essay was a work that sheds light on the Ohio Germans in the Civil War: *A German Hurrah! Civil War Letters of Friedrich Bertsch and Wilhelm Stängel, 9th Ohio Infantry*, translated and edited by Joseph R. Reinhart. (11) It makes an important

contribution to our understanding of the experience of the German-American soldier in the Civil War. It consists of ninety-eight letters written by Bertsch and Stängel, which appeared in the German-American press. Reinhart notes in the Introduction: "The story assembled from the letters in this compilation is one of pride and prejudice, zeal for the Union cause, disappointment and even anger at perceived mismanagement of the war, hard-fighting men, sacrifices and suffering, complaints and compliments, the good and the bad. The letters convey how this strong German regiment stood apart from Anglo-American units: while impressing the latter with their combat skills and boldness, they seemed different, possibly more like a foreign ally than a regiment of Americans speaking German." (12)

In 2012, Dann Woellert's *Cincinnati Turner Societies: The Cradle of the American Movement* appeared. Although it does not focus specifically on the Civil War, it does include a chapter on "Cincinnati Turnvereine during the Civil War." This provides

a concise overview of the topic within the context of Turner history. (13) In addition to surveying the involvement of Turners in the Civil War, Woellert sheds light on their impact on the area: "The picture of the German American experience from the firsthand voices of these German immigrants gives us a fresh perspective describing how the distinct German social fabric of Cincinnati was woven." (14) The Turners thus contributed not only to the war effort, but exerted an impact on social life as well.

Two works appeared recently that deal with German-American field commanders from Ohio: August Kautz and Godfrey Weitzel. Their stories are unique, but like the German contribution to the winning of the Civil War, are relatively unknown. This factor, as I noted in my essay, is what motivated me to work on the Kaufmann and Tafel book projects. All too little is known about the involvement of German-Americans in the Civil War in general, and about officers, such as Kautz and Weitzel, in particular. Fortunately, two books have appeared recently about them.



Brevet Maj. Gen. August V. Kautz
Courtesy of Wikipedia

Augustine Valentine Kautz, USA: Biography of a Civil War General by Lawrence G. Kautz appeared in 2008. (15) The author's great-grandfather and the general were cousins. Kautz (1828-95) was born in Pforzheim in Baden, and came to America with his family as a child in 1828. His family settled in Ripley in Brown County, Ohio, and when the Mexican War broke out in 1846, he joined the Army, remaining in it until the time of the Civil War. Today, Kautz is relatively unknown, but actually played an important role in the Civil War. Only one example will be cited here: His involvement in the capture of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan (1826-64).

During "Morgan's Raid" through Ohio, two cavalry brigades, one led by Kautz and the other by Henry M. Judah, chased Morgan's troops as they tried to escape across the Ohio River at Buffington Island near Portland, Ohio. The Battle of Buffington Island along the river blocked the Confederate retreat across the river, resulting in the capture of 700 of the 1,300 Confederate troops. Morgan and about 600 of his soldiers escaped, but were finally captured near New Lisbon, Ohio. Although Kautz was not involved in the actual capture of Morgan, his Brigade was one of the two that chased down his troops, making his capture possible. So the credit all went to those directly involved in the capture, while Kautz's Brigade gets little, or no mention. The reasons for this can be ascribed to what others had to say, and what Kautz did not say.

The author notes: "It is interesting to read the official reports of the various officers who took part in the Battle of Buffington Island, each attempting to



Maj. Gen. Godfrey Weitzel
Courtesy of Wikipedia

take as much credit for the victory as possible. Especially self-serving is that of General Judah, who...gives almost full credit for the victory to himself and the troops under his command....

The Fiction Award, however, goes to Leroy Fitch, who rushed off to Cincinnati after the battle to make sure the newspapers were aware that he had defeated Morgan

almost singlehandedly..." (16)

While others boasted of their role in the Battle of Buffington Island and the final capture of Morgan,

Kautz wrote a modest report, stating that his role consisted of "the continuous march" after Morgan's troops, and "coming upon the enemy in time to prevent his orderly retreat from the river...and the spirited attack of the men...thus causing in a great measure their disorderly retreat..." There certainly was no self-praise here, causing the author to note that his ancestor had not learned "the manly art of beating his own drum..." (17)

Another noteworthy German-American general was Godfrey Weitzel (1834-84). He was born in Winzeln in the Rheinpfalz, and like Kautz came to America with his parents as a child. He studied at West Point, and like Kautz served in the Mexican War. In April 1865, he led the 25th Army Corps, an all-Black unit, into the burning city of Richmond, Virginia, which Confederate forces had set on fire before abandoning what had been their capital city. This and other Civil War experiences are well told in G. William Quatman's *A Young General and the Fall of Richmond: The Life and Career of Godfrey Weitzel*, which was published in 2015. (18)

Quatman notes: "The irony of freed slaves wearing the Union blue and marching into the burning Confederate capital was apparent to everyone who witnessed the scene. Some of the most remarkable moments of Weitzel's career took place over the next few days inside the Davis mansion, which Godfrey occupied as his quarters." He also observes that Weitzel "is one of the least known of all the war's brigadiers, a mere footnote in a few books on the great domestic conflict." (19) The same could be said about other German-American field commanders, as well as the many German-American soldiers in the Civil War.

The works of Reinhart, Woellert, Kautz, Quatman and the works of Kaufmann and Tafel, which I have edited, contribute to our understanding of Ohio's German-Americans in the Civil War. However, there are many other soldiers, officers, and regiments whose stories need to be told. In my edition of Tafel's history I included several supplements on these topics, providing references for further study and research. (20) The leads are there for others to follow up on.

James Barnett commented: "The contributions of Cincinnati's German population to the Union cause during the Civil War were so extensive that they could fill many volumes if recorded in detail. The military contribution alone was of vast dimensions. German immigrants played a significant role in Union military affairs, both individually and collectively... Moreover, Cincinnati provided the Union army with a number of high ranking officers who were either

natives of Germany or of German origin.” (21) The same holds true for the service of Ohio’s German-Americans in the Civil War.

Notes

1. Ken Burns’ film, “The Civil War,” was first shown in September 1990, and several times thereafter, including on its 25th anniversary in 2015.
2. Wilhelm Kaufmann, *Die Deutschen im amerikanischen Bürgerkriege (Sezessionskrieg 1861-1865)*. (München: Druck und Verlag von R. Oldenbourg, 1911).
3. Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *Catalog of the German-Americana Collection, University of Cincinnati*. (München: K.G. Saur, 1990), 2 vols.
4. Constantin Grebner, “We Were the Ninth,” *A History of the Ninth Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, April 17, 1861, to June 7, 1864*. Translated and edited by Frederic Trautmann. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987). For pictures of members of the regiment, see: “Photos of 152 Members of Die Neuner, the Ninth Ohio Voluntary Infantry Regiment,” with an Introduction by Don Heinrich Tolzmann, and list compiled by Kenny Burck. *The Tracer*. 37:3(2016): 90.
5. Wilhelm Kaufmann, *Germans in the American Civil War*. Translated by Steven Rowan and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann with Werner Mueller and Robert E. Ward. (Carlisle, Pa.: John Kallmann, Publishers, 1999).
6. For further information on Kaufmann, see my essay “Germans in the Civil War: Wilhelm Kaufmann’s History,” in my: *German-Americana: Selected Essays*. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2009), pp. 133-38.
7. Kaufmann estimated that 750,000 soldiers were German-American, either German- or American-born. This consisted of 216,000 German-born; 300,000 first generation American-born; and the rest consisting of descendants of earlier German immigrations. See: Kaufmann, *Germans in the American Civil War*, p. 79.
8. Tafel’s history, “Geschichte der Deutschen Cincinnati’s im Bürgerkriege,” appeared as a chapter in: *Cincinnati und sein Deutschthum*. (Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing Co., 1901). For the translated edition, see: Gustav Tafel, *The Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War*. Translated and edited with Supplements on Germans from Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana in the Civil War by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2010).
9. For Tafel’s discussion of these regiments, see: Tafel, *The Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War*, pp. 27-41,45-48.
10. See: Kaufmann, *Germans in the American Civil War*, p. 78.
11. *A German Hurrah! Civil War Letters of Friedrich Bertsch and Wilhelm Stängel, 9th Ohio Infantry*, translated and edited by Joseph R. Reinhart. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010).
12. Ibid, p. 13.
13. Dann Woellert, *Cincinnati Turner Societies: The Cradle of the American Movement*. (Charleston, South Carolina: History Press, 2012).
14. Ibid, p. 7.
15. Lawrence G. Kautz, *Augustine Valintine Kautz, USA: Biography of a Civil War General*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2008).
16. Ibid, p. 105.
17. Ibid.
18. G. William Quatman, *A Young General and the Fall of Richmond: The Life and Career of Godfrey Weitzel*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015).
19. Ibid, pp. xv-xvi.
20. Tafel, *The Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War*, pp. 111-34.
21. Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Festschrift for the German-American Tricentennial Jubilee 1983*. (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Historical Society, 1982), p. 22.