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Frank Baron’s new study, Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters, aims to analyze the relationship between one of America’s greatest presidents and a group of revolutionary refugees. However, the book’s contribution to historiography is limited due to structural problems, imprecise reasoning, terminological inconsistencies, and the lack of an exact explanation of what the author plans to accomplish.

Baron draws on sources that, to my knowledge, have not been previously examined. He was granted access to the archives of the New York Turner Society, and he located previously unknown copies of the Turn- Zeitung, the newspaper of the German-American Turner organization. He also consulted such German-American newspapers in Indiana as the Freie Presse von Indiana.

Based on that material, Baron investigates the connection between Abraham Lincoln and the Forty-Eighters. Unfortunately, he frequently uses the term “German-Americans” interchangeably with “Forty-Eighters” and often treats German-Americans as if they were a single unified group. For instance, Baron argues that a “quiet alliance between the German-Americans [emphasis added] and Abraham Lincoln existed” (3). On the same page however, he explains his aim to “reconstruct the convergence of their common interests. “Converging” interests is not as concrete as some kind of “alliance” between Lincoln and either German-Americans or Forty-Eighters. Which does Baron mean?

Such uncertainty could have been avoided had Baron identified the subjects of his study more precisely. All Forty-Eighters were German-Americans (although some despised the term), but the Forty-Eighters constituted only a small portion of all German-Americans. Despite their influence, they were far from the only political actors in the German-
American community. Even though most Forty-Eighters held broadly similar political convictions, they constantly fought over minor issues. Personal feuds, some of which lasted for decades, also divided them. In short, the Forty-Eighters never formed an alliance with Lincoln, informal or explicit, because they did not act as a unified group. Individual Forty-Eighters may have done so, but others considered Lincoln merely to be “not an excellent, but also not an insignificant man.”

Baron also is quite vague on the goals of his study. He does not explain his method nor does he provide any theoretical background. The lack of conceptualization is readily apparent in the table of contents. Following a short introduction Baron first describes “The Radical Turners of New York” and then explains their involvement of the Turner in “The Campaign against Slavery in Kansas.” Neither chapter has much to do with Lincoln. Perhaps the book was not originally intended as a monograph but was composed of separately written essays that were only later combined into a single work. That could be one reason why Baron often repeats himself and generally fails to connect separate threads that run through the book.

Although Baron frequently addresses the negative reaction of the Forty-Eighters to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he fails to offer a coherent explanation of the political movements of German-Americans in the 1850s. For instance, he claims that the New Yorker Staatszeitung admitted that “the failure of policies” led to the “Sack of Lawrence.” However, the Staatszeitung never considered the “newly forming Republican Party” to be a “realistic alternative” to the Democratic Party, with which the newspaper had a close alliance (36). Indeed, the Staatszeitung, one of the most influential German-American papers, never abandoned the Democrats. The editors considered the party of Jackson the backbone of the Union and received patronage from the powerful Democratic machine in New York City. Unsurprisingly, the Staatszeitung aggressively denounced those Forty-Eighters who advocated severing ties with the Democrats and supporting the Republican Party.

The chapter on Kansas addresses the involvement of German Turners in the campaign to turn the territory into a free state. In providing details on the close cooperation between radical Anglo-Americans and

radical German-Americans (including many Forty-Eighters), Baron makes an important contribution to an issue that Mischa Honeck has recently examined in more depth in *We are the Revolutionists.*

Baron’s chapter also contains valuable information on important German-Americans such as physician Charles Friedrich Kob, who tirelessly fought to turn Kansas into a free state. Baron also provides information on the life of J. P. Hatterscheidt, a Turner who later became a delegate of the Republican Party at its Chicago Convention of 1860.

However, the chapter also exemplifies one of Baron’s greatest weaknesses as a writer: his habit of confusing his readers by constantly moving back and forth in time. This problem is even more pronounced in the rather short chapter “The Movement against Immigrants.” Its major thesis is that the nativist movement strengthened the political power of the immigrants in the long run (65). The basic argument is reasonable, because the slavery question grew more urgent in the course of the 1850s, causing both northern nativists and Forty-Eighters to join the ranks of the antislavery Republican Party. The presence of nativists within the Republican Party was a constant point of contention between the Forty-Eighters and Anglo-American Republicans. The resulting relationship between the Republican Party and the Forty-Eighters was not nearly as smooth as Baron would have his readers to believe.

Having established the Know-Nothings as the major nativist force in the state elections of 1854 and 1855, Baron notes their attempts in Massachusetts to “bar all immigrants from voting or holding office” (67). Later on the same page, he tells the reader that the final version of the constitutional amendment that was “presented to the citizens of Massachusetts” restricted the right to vote by naturalized citizens for only two years. However, the reader learns only later that the final referendum occurred in 1859 (70). He then states: “It galvanized the German-American communities to condemn the amendment and to cause a shift among German voters from Democrats to Republicans.”

In order to make that point, Baron characterizes the Two-Year Amendment as a successful “Know-Nothing initiative” (70), although it was the overwhelming Republican majority in the Massachusetts legislature that sent the amendment to the voters for ratification. In 1858–59, Republicans far outweighed the Know-Nothings (and Democrats)


in numbers in the legislature, rendering Baron’s statement that “a significant number of Republicans [voted] with the Know-Nothings” misleading. The Forty-Eighters knew that much of the blame for the Two-Year Amendment rested with the Republican Party.

Instead of using those events to explain why the Forty-Eighters demanded concessions from the Republican Party at the Chicago Convention of 1860, Baron adds the presidential election of 1856 to his narrative. Although it would have been better to limit his statement to the Forty-Eighters, he is correct that “many German-Americans . . . engaged in an energetic campaign to elect John Frémont” in 1856 (68). However, Baron falsely claims that Frémont lost “Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin.” In fact, Frémont won Ohio and Wisconsin but lost the other two states (72).

In discussing the German-American opposition to the Two-Year Amendment in Massachusetts, Baron writes that the German Forty-Eighter Adolph Douai “even proposed secession from the Republican Party and the establishment of an independent party to represent German interests (70). Such an extreme measure could not be taken seriously and it was not.” A few paragraphs earlier, however (and also on page 37), Baron had discussed Douai’s plan to form a German organization in 1856, saying that Douai and Kob devised a “plan to organize German-Americans on a national basis.” Obviously both plans were related, but Baron fails to see the connection and treats them as if they were entirely different. He regards one as “extreme” and the other as an attempt “to prevail in the next election.”

The formation of a separate German party to advance the cause of freedom and equality was a major theme of German-American discourse during the early 1850s. The first Forty-Eighter to propose a German organization (or German party) was Karl Heinzen in 1851. In the following years Heinzen made repeated attempts to realize his idea, the most famous being the Louisville Platform of 1854. His efforts failed, however, partially because he had a domineering, abrasive personality and constantly feuded with other Forty-Eighters.

In the presidential election of 1856, Heinzen enthusiastically supported the Republican Party, but shortly after its defeat Heinzen switched tactics. Publishing a platform in his newspaper, Der Pionier, he joined Kob and Douai in advocating a German organization.

8. Ibid., 129–204.
9. Ibid., 408–10.
Nothing came of it, but when the Republican Party in the Northeast exhibited nativist tendencies, other Forty-Eighters proposed to abandon the Republican Party to form a party of freedom untainted by nativism. That concept was first advanced by Gustav Struve in 1857 and revived on several occasions in subsequent years. The Forty-Eighters were deeply divided on the question of whether they should try to rid the Republican Party of nativism from the inside or break with the Republicans to form a separate German organization. Indeed, this is exemplified by an appeal by the *Turn-Zeitung* to all Turner Societies in the United States (212—15). The *Turn-Zeitung* joins the call by “a Central Committee of German Republicans” to send delegates to a conference in the Deutsches Haus, scheduled two days before the opening of the Chicago-Convention. In both language and content, it is obvious that the *Turn-Zeitung* is unsure what strategy to pursue: fighting for the reform of the Republican Party from within or forming a separate organization to negotiate with Republicans.

In chapters five to seven Baron turns his attention to the connections that existed between Lincoln and the Forty-Eighters during the 1850s. Baron stresses Lincoln’s opposition to nativism that dated to the formation of the Republican Party in Illinois and provides many examples of Lincoln’s attempts to remain in good standing with prominent German-American supporters of the Republican Party. It should be noted that not all of these German-Americans were Forty-Eighters. Some of them like George Schneider were, but others like Gustav Koerner had immigrated to the United States in the 1830s.

Motivated by a dislike of nativism as well as the political reality that any antislavery party had to gain the support of a significant number of German-Americans in order to win elections in Illinois, Lincoln decided to speak out strongly against nativism in his famous letter to German-American newspaper editor Theodore Canisius. In an attempt to win allies to support his ambitions to higher office, Lincoln had supported Canisius financially, although he was in financial straits himself. Certainly, Lincoln expected Canisius to support him in return, but his small paper was not very influential. It is possible that Lincoln overestimated Canisius’s influence. He was ill-suited to act as “Lincoln’s agent for the German vote” (121), if Lincoln indeed ever had such inclinations. The letter to Canisius, though, did Lincoln much good during the presidential campaign of 1860.

Unfortunately, Baron does not use his findings to examine the charac-

ter of the antebellum Illinois Republican Party more closely, especially its positions on slavery and nativism. Instead he prefers a narrower focus that cites the close connection between Lincoln and prominent German-Americans from Illinois as examples of a long-lasting alliance that culminated in the support they provided to Lincoln’s presidential bid in 1860. Nevertheless, in the case of Georg Schneider, Baron has to concede that the Forty-Eighter apparently was an “ardent Seward man” (111), who only supported Lincoln when it was clear that Seward would not win the support of the Republican Party of Illinois. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that Lincoln was at least an acceptable candidate to most German-American supporters of the Republican Party.

Evidence for the alleged alliance between Lincoln and the German-Americans or Forty-Eighters is scarce. Theodore Hielscher, the editor of the Freie Presse von Indiana and a supposed ally of Lincoln, only named him among five contenders (Salmon P. Chase, Cassius Clay, John C. Frémont, and William Seward being the others) for the Republican nomination (116–17). Despite the support of Wilhelm Rapp, editor of the Turn-Zeitung (and later of the Baltimore Wecker), Lincoln was not well known by most German-Americans.

Nevertheless, Baron’s research has revealed that there were some Forty-Eighters who publicly advocated the nomination of Lincoln or at least considered him to be a reasonable choice. Still, as my own research has shown, German-American preferences, often assumed to rest with Seward, varied widely; John C. Frémont, never in serious consideration among Anglo-American Republicans, had a substantial following among German-American supporters of the Republican Party.11

As Baron correctly notes, German-Americans were more united in their opposition to the nomination of Edward Bates. However, Baron fails to mention the origin of the Bates candidacy, which largely was an attempt by the powerful Blair family of Missouri to find a candidate who would broaden the base of the Republican Party in Missouri and increase the political power of the Blair family. To that end they enlisted the support of Heinrich Börnstein, owner of the influential St. Louis-based Anzeiger des Westens.12

The attempt to turn Bates, a recent convert from the Know-Nothings to the Republican Party, into a champion of German-Americans backfired badly because the candidacy ran into heavy opposition from many Forty-Eighters who considered him to be a nativist and an opportunist. Baron has unearthed more evidence that illustrates how

12. Ibid., 491–93.
widespread that opposition really was. The crucial objective for the Forty-Eighters was the nomination of a candidate without nativist tendencies and with an impeccable record of opposing slavery.

Baron also addresses the famous German meeting at the Deutsches Haus that preceded the Chicago Convention and was organized by Forty-Eighters in the eastern United States. They were not represented as delegates at the convention. It is not correct to characterize the Germans from the East as radicals and the Westerners as conservative (124). Both groups were radical; however, the German delegates from the western states had much more influence within the Republican Party and therefore were much less likely to support the creation of a “German party.” Many efforts by such western delegates as Carl Schurz aimed to alleviate the tensions caused by this uneven representation.13

Baron fails to add anything substantial to James Bergquist’s comprehensive analysis of the conference. Bergquist concluded that the meeting did not influence the Convention.14 Despite calling this interpretation into question (124), Baron does not provide any new information to challenge it. He relies on F. I. Herriot’s lengthy essays on the topic, published more than eighty years ago. Baron also offers no conclusive evidence for an alliance between Lincoln and any German-American, except for a speech by Gustav Koerner, neither a Turner nor a Forty-Eighter, who urged the Indiana delegation to support Lincoln.

If such an alliance had existed, one would have expected a different reaction to Lincoln’s nomination. Many German-American newspapers reacted with surprise.15 Additionally, during the Civil War many Forty-Eighters, especially those of a more radical kind, abandoned the Lincoln administration and supported John C. Frémont’s candidacy for president in 1864. They only grudgingly returned to the Republican fold when Frémont withdrew from the race.16 It is fair to conclude that the “alliance” between Lincoln and the German-Americans was either not very stable or it never existed in the first place.

Finally, in his attempt to measure how much the German-American vote was responsible for Lincoln’s election (chapter 7), Baron exposes another flaw of his book. In the wake of several remarkable studies

13. Ibid., 455–58, 500–17.
that have enhanced our understanding of the Forty-Eighters, *Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters* feels like a step backwards.\(^\text{17}\)

Baron’s book contains more than sixty pages of German-American sources from the 1850s in the original German and an able English translation by Judith Arnold. Those sources deal with a great variety of topics, from the history of the Turners to Germans in Kansas, to events preceding the Chicago Convention. It is important that more German-American sources are made available in translations, and these serve as a valuable addition.