If one defining feature could be told of the United States of America, it is that the nation is a melting pot of diverse cultures from nations all over the world. This fact is due to the huge amounts of immigration that occurred throughout the nation’s history. It is hard to go far without seeing evidence of foreign influence. Chinatowns and sushi restaurants are only some of the more obvious examples. People do not realize how much of their lives, foods, and traditions have been affected by the foreign culture brought over by immigration. One ethnic group that is especially overlooked is the Germans, despite their vital role in creating and protecting the America we know today. It was the German-America of the mid-1800s who preserved and saved the nation. It was not done through providing low-cost labor for the construction of railroads, or through mining gold in the Western mines. It was in the Civil War. It was during this “Second Revolution” that these people came forward to save the Union. These people were there at anti-slavery meetings around the country. These people were there at Camp Jackson in Missouri and at the Battle of Gettysburg. These people fought both for the country that had accepted them, for the values of freedom and democracy they held dear, and even for the natives who scorned them. The names of Franz Sigel and Carl Schurz rang through the din of battle as over 200,000 German-Americans fought and died for the cause.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is impossible to deny the involvement of German-Americans in the Civil War. Without the anti-slavery support, the large population in Missouri, and the sheer amount of soldiers and leadership that they provided, the Union may very well not have won the war.

From the beginning of the history of English America, Germans had been immigrating to the New World. There were the famous German Palatines of 1709[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Forty-eighters fleeing from political prosecution in 1848[[3]](#footnote-3). By 1860, there were about 1,301,000 German-born people living in America.[[4]](#footnote-4) One noteworthy fact about the German immigrants was the huge amount of abolitionists among them. Not only were German-Americans opposed to the spread of slavery, but they actively wanted to destroy it in all parts of the nation. Many immigrants came to America seeking better lives and opportunity from a system not much different from serfdom, where they lived under the arbitrary rule of a lord that own their land and taxed their livelihood. Because of this, they were more likely to identify with the slaves than with the slaveholders.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1848, there was a series of failed democratic revolutions throughout the German region of Europe (Germany as a country had yet to unify). Because of this, many political dissidents left the area to avoid prosecution. Some ended up in America, where they were dubbed the “Forty-Eighters” due to the year of the revolutions. Having fought for democracy back in the homeland, these new immigrants were very politically active and often eager to take up the fight for liberty in the New World as well.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1855, the Sozialistischer Turnerbund, a German group, met at a national convention where they called slavery “as unworthy of a republic and directly opposed to the principles of freedom.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Meanwhile, the Cincinnati Freimännerverein’s Hocharächter (a name which loosely translates to “Freeman Union’s High Eight”) “demanded the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law.”[[8]](#footnote-8) These feelings of anti-slavery were not passive opinions. Organized groups publicly spoke out against slavery.

Their characteristic of anti-slavery was especially apparent during the proposal of the Kansas Nebraska Act. This Act, proposed by Stephen Douglas in 1854, would cause for the Transcontinental Railroad to be built through Illinois and, more importantly, allow for slavery to spread out into the new territories with the idea of “popular sovereignty”. Many Northerns were opposed to the bill because of this. The West had previously been seen as the huge area of freedom and opportunity where men, any men, could travel and achieve land and wealth through hard work. They believed the Kansas-Nebraska Act would allow slaveholders to come in and push the laborers aside with their cheap slave labor and huge plantations.[[9]](#footnote-9) The “National Era”, an abolitionist paper in the District of Columbia, called the Act a “criminal betrayal of precious rights.” While German-Americans were not the only group to speak out against this bill, they certainly were some of the most outspoken. They had come to America with visions and dreams of liberty and freedom. To see that country now offering the opportunity of the expansion of slavery must have seemed like betrayal.[[10]](#footnote-10) Not only that, but many German Immigrants had moved out to the West. The presence of slaves in the West would lower the economic power of the laborers and farmers there.[[11]](#footnote-11) They were, again, not alone against the act. Many newspapers, urged people to protest against the bill. However, the German-Americans were incredibly involved in the movement. As meetings were called around the world, the German Americans “flocked to meetings of their own in New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Canton, Indianapolis, Chicago, and elsewhere.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Even in Cincinnati, where they had previously supported the Democratic Party and Stephen Douglas, most German Americans were against the bill rather than for it. Indeed, the first “Anti-Nebraska” meeting in Cincinnati, which occurred on February 24, 1853, was “Organized and attended almost exclusively by Germans.”[[13]](#footnote-13) These people were actively meeting and working to prevent the passage of the bill for the sake of anti-slavery.

Their discontent was especially obvious through the newspapers. George Schneider, previously an editor at the time, later remembered how all the main German newspapers in the major cities of America, such as New York, Chicago, and St. Lois, had “Opposed at once the extension of slavery in the new territories, and, in fact, slavery itself.”[[14]](#footnote-14) *The Free West*stated “No class of citizens have manifested more indignation…than our immigrant and native Germans.”[[15]](#footnote-15) *The Daily Cincinnati Gazette* wrote “We understand that our German population are almost to a man opposed to the bill [of Kansas-Nebraska].”[[16]](#footnote-16) As shown in the latter quote, the German-Americans were known for opposing anti-slavery as an entire faction. Frederick Douglas, a renowned black activist against slavery, once said “A German has only to be a German to be utterly opposed to slavery.”[[17]](#footnote-17) All of this took place before the Civil War, and before the Emancipation Proclamation. As the politicians in the North skirted around the subject of slavery as a sort of national hot potato, German immigrants and natives were already among the most extreme abolitionists, calling for its complete dissolution in America.

Their support for anti-slavery continued on through Lincoln’s election and the Civil War, and served as a valuable asset on the side of the Union. Second Lieutenant Fredrick Martens wrote home to his family in August 24, 1861.

“As you know, in our southern states, slavery exists in all its atrociousness…I’d like to know what you’d think of a son who stayed at home when the enemy was at the door, making war on freedom, suppressing the freedom we paid so dearly for. Would I still be worthy of living in this land, enjoying this freedom, if I were not also willing to fight for this freedom, and if need be, to die for it?”[[18]](#footnote-18)

To not only protest but to physically fight in the army for the cause of anti-slavery: that is the mark of a true supporter. Martin Luther King Jr. once said “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Martens obviously believed this philosophy, as he felt that if he was not prepared to die for freedom, he was not worthy of it. This ardent passion for abolition among the German-Americans proved a vital force in defending the Union against the Confederacy.

The support of the German-Americans was especially significant in the border state of Missouri, which may very well have entered the Confederacy without the large population of pro-Union German-Americans. In fact, German-Americans constituted almost all of Lincoln’s votes in Missouri.[[19]](#footnote-19) St. Louis historian Scott Williams states “Lincoln knew he could count on Missouri Germans…to preserve the Union.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The support was especially strong in St. Louis. On January 1, 1861, A slave auction occurred there where a crowd “recorded as primarily Germans”[[21]](#footnote-21) caused a great disturbance, preventing the auction from continuing. It was the last slave auction in St. Louis. German-Americans are seen as the cause for the end.[[22]](#footnote-22)

However, the best aid given to the Union was through the soldiers. Of the ten regiments of volunteers raised in St. Louis, nine were “primarily German.”[[23]](#footnote-23) According to Historian Wihelm Kaufmann, about 31,000 German-Americans from Missouri fought in the Union army. At the time, there were approximately 91,000 German-Americans in the state.[[24]](#footnote-24) That would mean that over a third of the entire German-American population fought for the Union in the Civil War. One of the most significant moments was the attack on Camp Jackson. Governor Jackson of Missouri was a Southern sympathizer who wanted to bring Missouri into the Confederacy, despite the majority of the state being against it.[[25]](#footnote-25) On May 1861, the Missouri Volunteer State Militia moved to Camp Jackson near St. Louis.[[26]](#footnote-26) Unionist officials were worried they would capture the arsenal of weapons at St. Louis, since there were inadequate defenses. U.S. military forces then provided weapons to “groups of Germans loyal to the Union” and gave permission for them to protect the arsenal.[[27]](#footnote-27) Later, Lincoln sent Nathaniel Lyon to Missouri to capture the forces at camp Jackson. On May 10, 1861, Lyon ordered his forces, including the German Home Guard, to move in on the camp. Of his forces, 80% “were of German descent” with only 12% being non-immigrants.[[28]](#footnote-28) They surrounded Camp Jackson and the State Guard commander, General Daniel Frost, surrendered.[[29]](#footnote-29) This was a monumental event in the war because if Jackson had succeeded in capturing St. Louis, he would have brought Missouri into the Confederacy. As a border state, Missouri was vital in the war effort for the Union. If it had fallen into the Confederacy’s hands, it would have prevented the Union’s objective of seizing control of the Mississippi River.[[30]](#footnote-30) This would have given the Confederates a huge advantage and may have even led to their victory in the war. Without the large number of pro-Union German-Americans in Missouri, the Union may very well have lost the Civil War.

The German-American support for the Union was not simply shown through anti-slavery support nor was it limited to a single state. Over 200,000 German-Americans fought for the Union.[[31]](#footnote-31) As with the other soldiers, their reasons for fighting varied. Some fought for the preservation of the Union, or for the abolition of slavery, or simply to prove their worth. Regardless of the reasons, all were fighting another war besides the one against the South: The war against prejudice. The German-Americans believed that in fighting in the war, they would be able to prove their worth to native-born Americans who scorned their foreign roots. It was a common belief that bravery in battle “was thelitmus test for American manhood, and a key to true citizenship.”[[32]](#footnote-32) These people had more to lose than the war. They also had their shaky reputation as foreigners and outsiders that could quickly turn hostile should they seem cowardly or weak. Often, by some unfortunate catch-22, the chance to destroy racial prejudice was blocked by, in fact, racial prejudice. Their allies in the North would often call them cowardly and blame them for lost battles, especially after the retreat of the Eleventh Corps, a division with a large number of Germans, at the Battle of Chancellorsville May 2, 1863.[[33]](#footnote-33) However, their enemies in the South told a different story. On the Confederate side they were known to be unusually stubborn, and would continue to fight even after other native soldiers had fled,[[34]](#footnote-34) such as during the Second Battle of Bull Run[[35]](#footnote-35).

These opinions were obviously both susceptible to bias or prejudice, but the South side seems less probable. One reason was because there was no gain to be had in describing the “damned Dutch”[[36]](#footnote-36) as abnormally stubborn, beyond complaining. In the North, to call the German-American soldiers cowardly and blame them for the loss of a battle was to use them as a scapegoat, and thus shift blame off of someone else. It is possible the Southern soldiers may have also used the excuse of persistent enemy soldiers to explain their losses, but if that were the case then there would be no reason to single out the Germans. Another reason the South’s opinion on the German immigrants may be more accurate was because if their complaints were without any grounding aside from bias and hatred, it is likely they would instead brand them as cowards, idiots, or savages. Instead, these comments, though spoken negatively, translate into bravery and persistence.

Unfortunately, the officials in charge of the Northern armies were not typically in the practice of listening to the complaints of Southern soldiers, and their bias of German-Americans was as strong as any other’s. Union surgeon Carl Uterhard wrote to his family in 1863, declaring: “I don’t have much hope of being promoted, since the Americas loathe all the Germans and slight them whenever they can.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Another soldier, Wihelm Francksen, wrote “leave in peace the arrogant *Yankees* who think the Germans are only good enough to work for them, but otherwise pay them less respect than a Negro.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

German-Americans were involved with several Union victories. The Germans 9th Ohio Regiment including fought in Kentucky, Rowletts Station, Mill Springs, and Perryville.[[39]](#footnote-39) The 45th New York Infantry Volunteer, an almost completely German regiment, fought at the battles of Cross Keys, Groveton, Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, it was at the battle of Gettysburg that the strength of the German-Americans showed through. The Eleventh Corps was part of the Army of the Potomac with five thousand German-American soldiers out of its thirteen thousand; a large percentage.[[41]](#footnote-41) They had recently suffered a despairingly terrible failure at the battle of Chancellorsville in early May, 1863.[[42]](#footnote-42) This failure, which had ended in an unordered retreat, had branded the Eleventh Corps as the worst of cowards to the rest of the nation.[[43]](#footnote-43) They came into the battle of Gettysburg desperate to redeem themselves.[[44]](#footnote-44) On the first day the Eleventh Corps was put in a bad position, where they were attacked by Confederate soldiers. They fought back even after being abandoned by the other brigade before retreating to Cemetery Hill. The fact that they had been placed out alone in vulnerable positions led many German-Americans to believe that to the “Yankees,” they were nothing but cannon fodder. On the second day of the battle of Gettysburg, they showed that they were not. As the Confederate soldiers rushed onward to take the batteries on Cemetery Hill, the Eleventh Corps fought back with everything they had. This included “fence rails, handspikes, pistols, battery rammers”[[45]](#footnote-45) and of course, desperation. At one point a Confederate officer was said to have stood up on one of the artillery guns and shouted “This battery is ours!” In response, a German artilleryman shouted “No, Dis battery is *unser* [ours]!” before proceeding to knock the man down from his perch.[[46]](#footnote-46) Aided by the Second Corps, the soldiers repelled the attack on Cemetery Hill and held their position.[[47]](#footnote-47) In those moments as the force retreated, it can only be assumed the German-Americans felt lucky to be alive and giddy with the redeeming victory. As it turns out, their victory was far more significant than that. Had the hill been taken, the entire Union position would have been compromised.[[48]](#footnote-48) General Carl Schurz stated the event to have been “the fate of the battle.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Had that hill been lost, so too would have been the battle of Gettysburg. And who was there to save it but the craven Germans of the Eleventh Corps who had formerly been a laughingstock on both sides of the war. What made the victory even more impressive were their opponents: the infamous “Louisiana Tigers,” who “were considered some of the wildest, coarsest soldiers in Lee’s army.”[[50]](#footnote-50) They had attacked Cemetery Hill with this terrifying reputation, and the Eleventh Corps repelled them, “proving that they were not tigers after all, but men.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Unlike the native-born Americans fighting in the war, it can be said that the German-Americans were fighting two wars: One for the racial prejudices against the black slaves and another for the prejudices against themselves. Despite being called cowards, mocked for their broken English and culture, they were proud to wear the army uniform and march for their beliefs and home. They never quit, and with their help decisive battles were won that decided the result of the war.

Due to the revolutions of 1848 in Germany, there were several German immigrants who were veteran military fighters. Their leadership and skill led troops to many Union victories and inspired many more. Franz Sigel, a former soldier who now fought for the Union, was an important symbol for the German-Americans, especially those in St. Louis.[[52]](#footnote-52) As a colonel, he led the 3rd Missouri division under General Nathaniel Lyon where he fought at Camp Jackson, in St. Louis, and at the Battle of Carthage on July 5, 1861.[[53]](#footnote-53)[[54]](#footnote-54) On August 7, 1861 he was promoted to Brigadier General. This was partly because the Union recognized his popularity with the German-American soldiers and hoped to gain more recruits.[[55]](#footnote-55) Regardless of the reasons, Sigel proved to be an excellent leader. He led two divisions to a Union victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas[[56]](#footnote-56), and led the Eleventh Corps from the late 1862 to when he resigned in spring 1863.[[57]](#footnote-57) His name was shouted by soldiers as a rallying cry, who declared “I fights mit[with] Sigel”. This was later brought into composer John F. Poole’s Civil War song:

Ven I comes from de deutsche conuntree,/I vorks somedimes at baking,

Den I keeps a lager bier saloon [beer saloon]./Un den I goes shoemaking:

But now I was a sojer[soldier] been/To save de /Yankee Eagle,

To “schlauch” [give Hell] dem tam secession volks/I’m going to fight mit Sigel.[[58]](#footnote-58)

This song not only showed the pride German-Americans had for fighting for the Union, but also the widespread fame and popularity Sigel had. He was a symbol for all German-Americans fighting in the war. His tales of leadership, bravery, and victory inspired all who head them. He is mentioned again in the song “Our German Volunteers”:

There is a General in the West whose deeds have come to fame

He is a gallant soldier, and in movement he is game;

Then let us raise our voices high and give three hearty cheers

For Siegel [sic], hero of the West and his German volunteers. [[59]](#footnote-59)

His fame won respect not only for him but the German soldiers he led. The German-Americans looked to him as one of their own, who would see and lead them as soldiers instead of “Dutchmen” or foreigners. Under his leadership the German-America soldiers of the Union won many victories in the West.

Another celebrated leader in the war was Carl Schurz. He had come to America in 1852 and was already famous among the German-American population for his participation in the 1848 democratic revolutions in Germany. [[60]](#footnote-60) He was completely abhorrent of slavery, and when he arrived in America, he was shocked to find the nation had it.[[61]](#footnote-61) He quickly became involved politics with the Republican Party in 1856, and when from state to state giving speeches in German on anti-slavery and human rights.[[62]](#footnote-62)

His aid to Lincoln during his election campaign was especially vital. Schurz quickly recognized Lincoln as a fellow opponent of slavery (although Lincoln at the time had not yet endorsed abolition on his platform) and did everything he could to aid the man in winning the presidency.[[63]](#footnote-63) He began speaking for Lincoln and the Republicans in Wisconsin, a town with a large German population.[[64]](#footnote-64) In 1859 he spoke in Boston on the idea of “True Americanism,” and continued his support for Lincoln throughout 1860.[[65]](#footnote-65) His actions swayed thousands of German-Americans to the Republican Party.[[66]](#footnote-66) In thanks, Lincoln offered Schurz an appointment in Spain. Schurz however, declined in favor of remaining to aid in the Civil War.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Schurz was granted the position of brigadier general in charge of a division of soldiers.[[68]](#footnote-68) While some criticized him for a lack of “American training,” he proved his bravery and leadership skills at the Second Battle of Bull Run in summer, 1862.[[69]](#footnote-69) In March 1863, he “was promoted to Major General of Volunteers, and given temporary command of the Eleventh Corps.[[70]](#footnote-70)” He was there with the Eleventh Corps in Gettysburg against the feared Confederate “Tigers.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Schurz’s leadership was invaluable in the war effort. He brought his strong sense of human rights over to America from Germany, as well as his skills in leadership and war. With these he spread the ideal of human rights and led his soldiers to fight for them. His actions reflected the true reason of the Civil War. He stated in one of his speeches “you cannot deny one class of society the full measure of their natural rights without imposing restraints upon your own liberty. If you want to be free, there is but one way; it is to guarantee an equally full measure of liberty to all your neighbors. There is no other.”[[72]](#footnote-72) He was fully devoted to leading the United States into freedom, with words or with war. His support for Lincoln politically and militarily served as a powerful force for the Union.

The German-Americans provided substantial and significant support to the Union in the Civil War. In 1896, lieutenant colonel Augustus Choate Hamlin, a former soldier of the Eleventh Corps, published his autobiography. He asked “What would have happened to America, had it not been for resolute German Americans and their followers?”[[73]](#footnote-73) He worried that the credit due to them had been overlooked; that their bravery and contributions had been drowned out with prejudice and insulting titles such as “worthless Dutchmen.”[[74]](#footnote-74) These contributions must not be forgotten and left in ignominy.

The German-Americans who fought in the Civil War represented the spirit and cause of the struggle, maybe even more so than the native-born Americans. To them, the war had always been about equality, for the slaves and for themselves. They fought for abolition before Lincoln had been elected, and continued to fight thousands strong in the army. They kept Missouri in the Union, and saved the Battle of Gettysburg. There were there in every step of the Civil War. There were there, not as foreigners, but citizens fighting for their home, life, and ideals. They led, they followed, they rallied, and they fought. It is impossible to take the abolitionist German-Americans out of Missouri, to take 200,000 soldiers out of the Union army, to take out Franz Sigel and Carl Schurz, to take out the Eleventh Corps; to take away every German-America who aided the cause and say the Union might still have won. To say that would be like claiming victory would have been possible without Missouri, without troops, and without even Lincoln. Without the support of the German-Americas, the Union would not have had the strength to win the Civil War.

America is a land of incredible ethnic diversity. Because of this, people tend to see minorities as just that: minor. They dismiss ethnic groups as nothing more than foreigners, squatters, or even burdens, as if it is impossible that they could ever be any good for America. A German-America did not need to know English to understand that slavery was wrong, while a Southern slaveholder believed that since he was white, he was better. Although slavery has now been nationally accepted as an atrocity, parallels can be drawn. There may be a guy next door that speaks nothing but Swedish and eats surströmming,[[75]](#footnote-75) but he is not afraid to congratulate two men on their recent marriage. We would judge anyone in a heartbeat except ourselves. Let the efforts of the German-Americans in the Civil War serve as a reminder to understand difference without prejudice.

Word count: 4031

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