

1848 was one of the most significant years in 19th-century European history, with the continent being engulfed in numerous revolutions. Although each revolution had competing political ideas, most of the leadership was organized by classical liberals who promoted progressive ideas that advocated for democracy and individual liberty and challenged the monarchical and often feudal European status quo. One of the most significant revolutions of the year occurred in Germany. In 1848, Germany was a Confederation of 39 sovereign states that was ruled by a Federal Assembly of monarchs. The German Revolution of 1848 attempted to unite Germany as a single nation with a political system that adhered to the values of classical liberalism. The Revolution failed, and a mass emigration of political refugees ensued.

The United States was one of the most desirable destinations for German emigrants after 1848. In America, the wave of German immigrants immediately following the failure of the 1848 Revolution became known as the “Forty-Eighters.” Due to the nature of the revolution, most of the Forty-Eighters were politically liberal. As a group, they played a notable role in shaping American politics of the mid-to-late 19th century. One of the most popular locations for Germans to settle in was Illinois. Because of this, Illinois serves as an effective case study for the impact of the German Forty-Eighters on American reform movements in the mid-to-late 19th century. By examining the role of the Forty-Eighters in Illinois, it becomes clear that their impact was directly related to the political philosophies of the Revolution. It also becomes clear that to fully understand their impact, solely examining the notable leaders ignores the importance of the German-Americans as a political group after the 1848 wave of immigration.

To understand the political worldviews of German Forty-Eighters, it is crucial first to understand the situation in Germany leading up to the 1848 Revolution. Europe in the mid-19th century was an incredibly unstable environment, both politically and economically. The historian

Eric Hobsbawm provides a detailed account of the complex situation of the 19th century and the events that contributed to the creation of those conditions in *The Age of Revolution*. He explains that the British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution bookmarked the 18th century and set the stage for what would be a tumultuous 19th century. The Industrial Revolution demonstrated the success of an economic system based on industrial capitalism and prompted the spread of economic liberalism throughout Europe. Hitherto, the economic systems of Europe concentrated wealth into an upper class of nobles and lords, with the vast majority of the population consisting of peasants who worked the lands controlled by the nobles and lords. As this system was replaced by capitalism, the noble class lost its power, and many peasants were forced to find industrial jobs in urban areas, uprooting the lives of those belonging to all economic classes. Politically, the French Revolution of 1789-1799 normalised classical liberalism as the predominant progressive ideology of the time and provided a blueprint for radicals on conducting a revolution that could overthrow the monarchical status quo of the many centuries previous.

The dramatic change in material conditions brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the onset of capitalism, combined with the inspiration generated from the French Revolution, created a Europe where, by the 1840s, revolution seemed inevitable for both the upper and the lower classes. Germany was far from an exception to this feeling of inevitable change. As historian Bruce Levine described in “The Spirit of 1848”, “The economic disasters of the 1840s made German society's general economic crisis acute, and the same desperation that now propelled thousands abroad also increased conflict at home, raising the stakes as well.” Both Hobsbawm and Levine report a quote from the American consul to Amsterdam from 1847, commenting on the German emigrants who were passing through Holland. According to the

report, “All well-informed people express the belief that the present crisis is so deeply interwoven in the events of the present period that ‘it’ is but the commencement of that great Revolution, which they consider sooner or later is to dissolve the present constitution of things.” As was the case throughout Europe, the combination of political change with a dramatic alteration of material conditions created a situation in Germany that felt untenable to its people. For many Germans, like the ones described by the American consul to Amsterdam, immigration to a place with better opportunities was the best option—an attitude that is partially responsible for the first wave of immigration to America. But for many others, particularly the political radicals who had grown up inspired by the first French Revolution, and who recognized that multiple major uprisings were brewing throughout Europe, a revolution at home was the best option.

1848 was the year of revolutions throughout Europe and is often referred to as the “Springtime of Nations,” with each major insurgency in a nation inspiring an insurgency in another nation. The German revolution failed, and many of the Germans who participated feared significant reprisal from the authorities of the restored German Confederacy, making emigration a necessity for safety. But even for Germans who were not direct participants in the Revolution, the failure to change the dire status quo motivated immigration to the U.S.. Mass German immigration to America began in the first half of the 19th century. To those still in Germany by the 1840s and 1850s, American society came to be seen as a near paradise, where the poor had an opportunity to find work and potentially achieve wealth, and the democratic political system meant that leadership was determined by merit. Whereas the onset of capitalism in Europe forced the peasantry into harsh industrialization, where the poor felt they were paid far from their worth,

America was recognized for its vast expanse of capital and productive material resources, which promised to give Europeans in poverty the ability to find dignity and a stable livelihood.

The mass exodus in the aftermath of 1848 caused the German-American population to increase three and a half times more than the native-born population. By 1860, there were 1.3 million German immigrants in the U.S., accounting for 4% of the country's entire population. The impact of this was exacerbated by the fact that Germans were geographically concentrated in the same areas, with three-quarters living in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, and Iowa. Because German-Americans generally lived so close together, the cultural and political ideas that they brought as a group were amplified among themselves and became something that community leaders had to consider. In the context of the wave of immigration after 1848, the liberal ideals of German immigrants made them an important political bloc, especially in a state like Illinois that was divided on issues like slavery. By 1860, close to 8% of the state's population was German-born. In the major industrial hub of Chicago, that number was closer to 20.5%.

If a primary reason for immigration to the U.S. was to escape the industrialization of their homelands, many Germans would end up disappointed by the economic conditions of America. Although some German immigrants, particularly those better off financially, were able to establish a better life, most had to find manufacturing work in the quickly developing Chicago. By 1880, only 1.4% of employed German males in Chicago had a professional high-collar occupation. Just like Europe, the U.S. was in the process of industrializing, and the immigrants who came from poor backgrounds had to take the low-paying manufacturing jobs.

Despite this, Germans were still typically in a much better situation than most other immigrant groups. This is particularly true for the political refugees who held leadership roles in

the 1848 Revolution. The coming of these wealthier political refugees was predicted in Illinois. On June 25, 1849, the Sangamo Journal reported, “Some 200,000 German immigrants, mostly men of means, more or less compromised in the revolutions, are expected to reach America, during the summer—probably adding some millions to the funds in the country. The investments for German accounts in our national and state funds are said to be very large.”

Politically, the Forty-Eighters found their voice as the 1850s progressed. As Alison Clark Efford explained in “German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era,” “German Americans had always maintained that their cultural background should be no impediment to American citizenship, but during the decade before the Civil War, many of them began to link this idea to antislavery politics....[M]ost...Forty-Eighters saw antislavery as a natural extension of the liberal nationalism that they had fought for in Europe.” At the time, the most effective means for spreading a political message among groups was newspapers. In Illinois, the number of newspapers increased from 43 titles in 1840 to 300 titles in 1860. This increase included many titles by Forty-Eighters, including the Illinois Staats-Zeitung. The paper was founded in 1848, but became a weekly title in 1851 after being taken over by George Scheinder, who fought in German Revolution and used the paper to oppose slavery and nativism. The policies supported by Scheinder, the Staats-Zeitung, and the majority of Forty-Eighters aligned with the newly formed Republican Party. German-Americans became a major part of the Party’s base. By 1876, the Illinois Staats-Zeitung became known as the leading Republican newspaper of the Northeast, despite being printed in German.

A significant factor in why the Republican Party aligned so well with the values of the Forty-Eighters was that the Forty-Eighters actually had a role in shaping the policy of the Party, particularly when it came to the Party’s stance on immigration. Four months before the first

Republican National Convention in 1856, a group of newspaper editors from Illinois, united by their opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, met in Bloomington for the Illinois Anti-Nebraska Convention. The meeting was initially set up to find a political candidate for President who opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but would end up establishing the foundation for the Republican Party. Among the attendees was Scheinder and the German editor of the Journal of Quincy, both of whom represented the German-American voice. Their presence demonstrates the importance German-Americans were thought to have to the Republican Party as a political bloc. Another participant of the meeting was Abraham Lincoln, who travelled from Springfield. Lincoln was invited by Scheinder because they had been personal friends since 1853. At the meeting, the group formalized resolutions objecting to the expansion of slavery into free territories, calling for the reinstatement of the Missouri Compromise, and advocating for the protection of the First Amendment. The group also passed a resolution, written by Scheinder himself, that supported immigration and admonished Know-Nothingism.

At the Republican National Convention of 1860, Scheinder served as a delegate, along with three other fellow Forty-Eighters, including Gustave Koerner, who was also from Illinois. Koerner helped write a pro-immigration resolution, referred to as the “Dutch Plank,” that was along the same lines as the resolution Scheinder proposed at the Illinois Anti-Nebraska Convention. It was adopted as the fourteenth resolution in the official Republican Party platform, and is the picture on the right. The resolution was a significant win for all immigrant groups, but the fact that it was crafted by German immigrants demonstrates both the liberal ideas that German-Americans brought as well as the impact they were able to have in politics. The role that Scheinder and Koerner had in particular demonstrates the strength of German-Americans as a political unit in Illinois.

The German-American contingent in Illinois responded to the favorable Republican Party platform engineered by notable Forty-Eighters with overwhelming support. An article on the political leanings of German-Americans in the Midwest in the October 2nd, 1857 edition of the Sangamo Journal said that, “In Illinois, they are, almost unanimously, Republicans.” In turn, Republicans understood the importance of the Forty-Eighters as a voting bloc. In 1859, Lincoln, with the Republican nomination in sight, purchased a secret ownership stake in the Illinois Staats-Zeitung to influence the support of liberal German-Americans.

By late 1860, a German Republican Club had been created in Illinois, as evidenced by its mention in the September 5th, 1860 edition of the Sangamo Journal. This support extended to the nomination of Lincoln and the 1860 Presidential campaign. Former revolutionaries such as Ernst Violand, who immigrated to New York after being condemned to death for his participation in the 1848 Revolution, found himself settled in Peoria, Illinois, lecturing, writing for the newspapers, and making stump speeches for the Republican Party. German-Americans also organized as a group in Illinois, forming the German Lincoln Club and attending protests in support of Lincoln. According to the August 23rd, 1860 edition of the Sangamo Journal, “About eighty of the Wide Awakes and German Lincoln club turned out with their torches and made a short march through the streets....”

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, German-Americans in Illinois continued their support for anti-slavery and Lincoln. In the first six months of the war, 6,000 Germans enlisted and were often put in regiments consisting mostly of other German-Americans. Among these ranks were multiple regiments led by Forty-Eighters. A notable German-American Civil War veteran with ties to Illinois was Frederick Hecker. In Germany, Hecker was one of the most important leaders of the German Left in the 1840s. He attempted to organize a revolt in 1848 and

1849 before emigrating to America and settling in Summerville, near the Belleville region. In the Civil War, Hecker was given command of the 24th Regiment, a newly formed regiment of German volunteers, although it fell apart due to a lack of confidence in Hecker's ability as a military leader. Hecker found more success after being given command of the 82nd Regiment from Chicago, another German volunteer regiment. The 82nd was part of the Fourteenth Corps of the Army of the Potomac, which consisted mostly of German troops and leadership. Organizing the army around ethnic groups was a common Union strategy at the start of the war due to shared languages and pre-established cultural communities.

The impact of the German 48ers in the Civil War was particularly noticeable in the Illinois regiments because most of the immigration to Illinois came as a result of the Revolution, which was not entirely the case in other areas highly populated by Germans, like New York or Ohio. Following the conclusion of the war, the 82nd was celebrated in Chicago on June 19th, 1865. In a speech, Chicago Mayor John Wentworth praised the 82nd, stating, "A few years ago there was a cry raised that foreigners could not be trusted and that an attempt was made to disenfranchise you, but when at last the time came that tried men's souls...you have done honor to your adopted countries." Amid the anti-immigrant sentiment that was popular in the mid-19th century, service in the Civil War provided German immigrants an opportunity to prove their worth to their new country. In Illinois, the unique number of regiments formed by Forty-Eighters added complexity to that idea. Despite being born in Germany, the Forty-Eighters were drawn to the founding values of the U.S. because they sought to implement similar values in their own country. Service in the Union army appealed to Forty-Eighters as a means to continue fighting for the values that had been inscribed upon the Forty-Eighters as a group as a result of the material conditions of mid-19th-century Europe.

Much of the wider German-American support for the Union in the Civil War was based on their strong support of abolitionism. In Illinois, they staunchly supported abolitionists, even perceived radicals such as John Brown. The April 9th, 1863 edition of the Illinois Staats-Zeitung reported on a major Republican electoral victory in Davenport that inspired crowds of demonstrators. As described in the paper, a “jubilant crowd marched through the streets singing the John Brown song.” The actions of the crowd were celebrated by the paper as the article proclaimed, “Long live abolitionist Davenport!”

The Illinois Staats-Zeitung consistently printed strong pro-abolitionist messages. For example, an article from September 22nd, 1863, read, “[W]e radicals consider the complete abolition of slavery as the indispensable condition for the readmission of a rebel state as a full-fledged member of the Union.” The often-radical support the Illinois Staats-Zeitung expressed for the cause of abolition demonstrated that the Forty-Eighters who ran the newspaper felt strongly about the cause. It also demonstrated that even the average German-American wanted to read literature that strongly supported abolition, showing the impact that the liberal ideals of the Forty-Eighters had on German-Americans as a group.

However, German support for abolition had many racist undertones. As Mischa Honeck argued in “We Are the Revolutionists”, the social structures in which the Forty-Eighters existed were structurally racist, and they failed to break from the inherently racial framing of opposition to slavery that the system of abolitionist protest as a whole was tethered to. As Honeck explains, “Paramount to the dislike of slavery was the white farmer's fear that by tilling next to black slaves he might ultimately be mistaken for one. Consequently, most German American free-soilers found nothing hideous about homestead initiatives welcoming only 'free white persons' to vacant public lands.”

Forty-Eighters from Illinois provided no exception to this idea. Honeck describes the arguments of the aforementioned Freiderich Hecker, furthering, “Doing nothing to stop the influx of ignorant, save Africans' from the South, Friederich Hecker argued, magnified the threat of a slave revolt that could turn out far bloodier than the fearsome Haitian revolution.” Although the Forty-Eighters strongly supported abolition, they also exhibited the same perception of racial superiority that was present throughout the white leadership of the abolitionist movement.

Immediately after the Civil War, Forty-Eighters from Illinois continued their close connection with the Republican Party. The Illinois Staats-Zeitung was purchased by Anton C. Hesing in 1867, a German-American who immigrated in 1839. He brought Hermann Raster, a former leader in the 1848 Revolution who became a well-known writer for the New Yorker Abend-Zeitung upon immigration to America. Both Hesing and Raster were staunch Republicans and used the paper to support Republicans in return for Republicans to support Germans. Hesing, who established himself as the political boss of Chicago Germans in the 1860s, leveraged his control over German-Americans in Chicago to push against nativism and put other German-Americans in local government positions.

Even before Hesing bought the paper, the Staats-Zeitung fought against nativism. For example, in the midst of the Civil War, the paper levied criticism towards War Secretary Edward Stanton, arguing that Stanton was “infected by a remnant of that despicable Know-Nothing spirit which flourished a few years ago.”

Another important issue for Germans was the free consumption of alcohol, making opposition to alcohol control a crucial political topic for leaders such as Hesing and Raster. In 1872, the Staats-Zeitung criticized William Massenberg, a German-American who served in the Chicago legislature, for supporting a Temperance Law. In the April 6th edition of the paper, the

Editor wrote, “The principle says that not the drunkards shall be punished for the damage they do, but the innkeepers. The Drunkards are to be coddled and rewarded and made into agents ‘provocateurs’ against the innkeepers. That is the magnificent ‘principle’ with which Mr. Massenberg declares himself in agreement....The whole intent and meaning of his letter to the Journal was to present him to the American temperance advocates as a fit candidate for Secretary of State. The intent and meaning of it is to recommend him to the German anti-Temperance people....We would have to lie if we were to say that the double face that Mr. Massenberg exhibits inspires in us any feeling that resembles esteem....”

The incident is an example of the paper’s ability to put pressure on politicians to support policies that benefit German-Americans. That same year, Hesing and Raster informed the Republican Party that they would lose the German vote if they supported the prohibition movement. At the Republican National Convention, they were able to pressure the party to adopt a platform that disapproved of the State and the Federal Government from passing “any unconstitutional laws for the purpose of removing evils,” a resolution that attempted to reject the prohibition movement. Because of his involvement, it became known as the “Raster resolution.”

Examining the impact of the Forty-Eighters on American politics as a whole requires exploring both important leaders and the common German immigrant. A significant factor in why the Forty-Eighters were such a notable wave of immigrants was that they were political refugees who had experience organizing a revolution and could use that experience to organize others around them to promote the change they wanted to see. Figures such as Gustave Koerner, George Schneider, Friedrich Hecker, and Hermann Raster, all of whom were participants in the 1848 Revolution, were crucial political organizers in Illinois and were important contributors to the early policy of the Republican Party. With that said, solely focusing on the top of the

movement ignores that the opinions of the Forty-Eighters established them as a crucial political bloc.

The economic conditions that created the Revolution also spurred mass immigration to America. Although many political refugees were well-off, most people affected by the Revolution were not, which was a primary reason for the Revolution in the first place. The political spirit that was motivated by the poor economic conditions was liberal because, at the time, liberals managed to frame themselves as advocating for radical change to the status quo. Thus, after German immigration to the U.S. en masse after 1848, they developed as a strong, politically active voting bloc that supported progressive ideas like abolition. With the help of the German-American leaders who had participated in the Revolution, the Republican Party was able to capture that vote. Illinois serves as an effective case study for this because German support for the Republican Party was particularly strong in Illinois. Much of this was because Chicago became a significant hub for poor German immigrants because of its growing industrial economy, a theme that is consistent with immigration throughout the country. On top of this was the fact that many of the early policies of the Republican Party were organized in Illinois, meaning Forty-Eighters were able to leverage the power of the post-1848 German voting bloc to push for a party platform that benefited German-Americans and advocated for many of the liberal ideals Germans fought for in 1848.