

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

History Faculty Research and Publications

History, Department of

Winter 2020

Review of *Germans in Illinois* by Miranda E. Wilkerson and Heather Richmond

Alison Clark Efford

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Germans in Illinois, by Miranda E. Wilkerson and Heather Richmond. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2019. xi, 218 pp. Illustrations, graphs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.50 paperback.

Reviewer Alison Clark Efford is associate professor of history at Marquette University. She is the author of *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (2013).

By surveying the German immigrant experience in Illinois, Miranda E. Wilkerson and Heather Richmond have performed a valuable service. Germans contributed heavily to the distinctive economic, political, and cultural mix of the Midwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and now a reliable and engaging book summarizes their experience in one significant state. Complete with informative maps and images, *Germans in Illinois* stands out as an appealing synthetic study that should attract a wide readership.

Wilkerson and Richmond's thematic chapters advance their narrative, beginning with the context of European emigration in the 1830s and 1840s and concluding with the twenty-first-century legacy of German

immigration. German Europe was struggling in the 1840s as agricultural crises hit and small-scale producers competed with large manufacturers. Economic challenges and political restrictions both contributed to the revolutions of 1848, so after the revolutions failed, some Germans emigrated for political reasons and others did so in the hope that their desperate economic situation would improve. Wilkerson and Richmond correct their own error that "it was the most vulnerable who left the homeland" (12) by quoting historian Mack Walker, who wrote that those who left were people "who had something to lose and who were losing it, squeezed out by interacting social and economic forces" (15).

Throughout, the authors draw on the work of other scholars and illustrate their points with published primary sources. For example, their description of "chain migration," in which migrants followed family and friends to the United States, includes part of a translated letter home, a missionary account, and intermarriage statistics. A "side story" excerpted from Alfred Kolb's *Als Arbeiter in Amerika* (1909) vividly portrays industrial work in nineteenth-century Chicago. Kolb found working in a bicycle factory and brewery so repetitive and exhausting that it stripped him of his dignity and left him too tired to communicate his discontent.

Turning to politics and culture, Wilkerson and Richmond describe anti-immigrant sentiment and the regulation of alcohol consumption. Chicago's Lager Beer Riot of 1855 was a response to Mayor Levi Boone's decision to close taverns on Sundays. The immigrant-led protest turned violent, resulting in one death. In 1860 a majority of Illinois's German-born voters supported Abraham Lincoln, as was the case in Iowa and a few other states. *Germans in Illinois* conveys the complexities of German-American partisanship, although it inaccurately asserts that newspaper editorials favored Lincoln "across the board" (11). Even in Illinois, almost every city that boasted a Republican German-language newspaper in 1860 also had a Democratic one. Although the authors cover the German-language press, they do not appear to have consulted it. They do use Wilkerson's linguistic research to good effect, arguing that the "verticalization" of German American institutions before and after 1900 caused the use of the German language to decline even before World War I. Wilkerson and Richmond judiciously present German immigrants' opposition to U.S. participation in the Great War and note that government-sanctioned harassment of Germans was short-lived. They are clear, however, about the extent of wartime persecution, providing an excellent account of the ethnically motivated murder of Robert Prager in 1918.

Despite its prudent portrayals, *Germans in Illinois* does not incorporate some of the more interesting conclusions of recent histories of Ger-

man America. Historians have been working on German interactions with Native Americans, assimilation and whiteness, ongoing transnational ties, women's organizing, and tensions among neighbors during World War I, but these do not feature in the book. Careful coverage takes the place of innovative interpretation. This trade-off is perhaps to be expected in a book for a general audience, but it stands as an opportunity missed.

Specifically, failing to include the latest historical research hampers comparison between German Americans and other immigrants, one of the authors' goals. The introduction likens nineteenth-century Germans to Spanish-speakers today and maintains that anti-German sentiment was not "unlike the divisive situation with regard to present-day immigrants and refugees" (3). Readers would have been better equipped to assess such claims if the book had acknowledged the advantages Germans enjoyed. It goes unmentioned that German immigrants were moving onto land from which Sauk, Meskwaki, and other Algonquian-speakers had been expelled a few decades earlier. The immigrants' whiteness gave them access to the ballot, as the authors note, and also economic opportunities and cultural capital. They arrived with resources that helped them do "well for themselves" (61) and "fit in well" (62). The authors often relegate discussion of the *relative* status of Germans to endnotes. *Germans in Illinois* would be even more valuable if it had better integrated explanations of inequality into its narrative and analytical structure.