RADICAL WARRIOR

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*August Willich's Journey from German
Revolutionary to Union General*

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Introduction

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RESURGENT REVOLUTIONS

HUNDREDS OF CINCINNATI GERMANS packed Arbeiter Hall on Sunday, January 29, 1860, then proceeded to the elegant Melodeon Building on the northwest corner of Walnut and Fourth Streets. They climbed stairs to the third floor where they joined a throng of like-minded citizens from all over the city for an annual event. A twenty-five-foot-high ceiling adorned with chandeliers, stuccoes, and ornamental elaboration made Melodeon Hall one of the country's most beautiful public spaces. The crowd heard from several speakers celebrating the 129th birthday of one of America's Founding Fathers. Local labor leader and newspaper editor August Willich gave the German-language address, praising Thomas Paine as the "embodiment of patriotism and free thought."[1]

Paine was America's first and foremost Revolutionary theorist. His direct and simple language appealed to literate colonists of all backgrounds. *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, sold more than one hundred thousand copies, the largest-selling book in American history proportional to population.[2] Paine's treatise helped persuade other founders to pursue independence, rather than merely a redress of grievances endured under their English sovereign. While living in France, Paine helped ignite the French Revolution. He later opposed the execution of Louis XVI on humanitarian grounds, then was imprisoned and barely escaped the guillotine himself. When his appeal to George Washington for help fell on deaf ears, Paine published a scathing denunciation of the American icon. Contempt for both the president and organized religion made Paine a pariah in the same United States he had played such a large role in creating. When he died in 1809, only six people attended his funeral. Two of the mourners were black freedmen.[3]

Abraham Lincoln was a great admirer of Thomas Paine. The twenty-six-year-old attorney and future president wrote a defense of Paine's deism in 1835, but an adviser burned it to save Lincoln's political career.[4] In 1860 some Philadelphians lobbied for Paine's portrait to hang alongside his patriot contemporaries in Independence Hall. Public outcry quashed that idea.[5]

August Willich sympathized with many of Paine's views on universal human rights, and with his opposition to all forms of slavery, animus against organized religion, and belief in the concordance of private interest with public good. Paine's vision included a political system as a compact among citizens, ever evolving toward a more perfect society until the need for government withers and moral virtue triumphs. Willich believed Paine when the Revolutionary patriot claimed, "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again."[6]

Like Paine, Willich derived certainty of purpose from his moral convictions. Paine insisted that liberty of conscience was not a favor bestowed on people by their government but a natural right of mankind. Willich's own conscience was shaped by two key figures in his childhood: the military hero father he never knew, and the famous liberal theologian and foster father who helped raise him. As a young man, Willich struggled to reconcile competing impulses he had inherited from his fathers. Filled with ethnic pride and romantic dreams of German destiny, the Prussian teenager fully embraced his duty to follow in his father's footsteps by serving in the military. Living in the extended family of acclaimed liberal philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, the young boy learned to question authority and set his own moral compass.

As he grew to manhood and became an army officer, Willich found his conscience troubled by the stark social divisions that title and privilege reinforced. He made the difficult decision to renounce his nobility and abandon a career in the Prussian Army. Initially seeking reform within existing government and religious frameworks, Willich soon adopted a radical prescription: overthrow the monarchy and replace it with communism.

Revolution in Europe began when the citizens of Paris rose up on February 22, 1848. French radicals, bent on restoring the republic Napoleon had usurped, rioted, and forced their king into exile. Consequently, they ignited a spontaneous conflagration of democratic revolts that swept the Continent. German republicans and liberal democrats mobilized rapidly, staging no fewer than three armed rebellions against the monarchs of several German states.[7]

Willich was a senior military leader in the rebel cause. Insurrections were put down easily in the German Confederation and throughout Europe. Willich eclipsed Karl Marx, becoming the popular leader of German political refugees in London, but enthusiasm for revolution ebbed soon after

their arrival. Though European revolutionaries achieved little in the short term, their goals of democracy and republican government on the Continent eventually came to pass. Like Thomas Paine, leading German revolutionists of 1848 became folk heroes in their day only to be chastised later as heretics or dreamers. Most were all but forgotten by succeeding generations.

Willich adapted his political philosophy and tactics to his new home in America. Scorned at first by Karl Marx as a stubborn idealist and dangerous adventurist in a Europe not yet ripe for revolution, Willich matured into a pragmatic and patient radical. He grudgingly acknowledged some of Marx's theories of labor and economy as worthy of consideration while immersing himself in the cause of the American worker. Where better to revise the relationship between labor and capital than in the largest democratic republic on earth? Willich edited one of Cincinnati's German-language newspapers, a handy mouthpiece for advancing his social and political views. Moreover, Willich worked tirelessly to help workers organize while promoting a unique vision of a social republic with trade unions and trade associations replacing traditional legislative structures. Yet he had limited success. Willich's grandiose schemes were discounted by more practical reformers who achieved modest gains in wage increases and reasonable working hours by the early 1860s.

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Willich's life offers an intimate glimpse into the international dimension of America's Civil War.[8] In an age of global social, economic, and political upheaval, transatlantic radicals helped affect America's second great revolution.[9] For Willich, the nature and implications of that revolution turned not on Lincoln's conservative goal of maintaining the national Union, but on issues of social justice, including slavery, free labor, and popular self-government. It was a war not simply to heal sectional divides, but to restore the soul of the nation, revive the hopes of democrats worldwide, and, in Willich's own words, "defend the rights of man."[10]

Thousands of rebels from the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848 and 1849 were among a million and a half individuals who emigrated from Germany to America in the decade prior to the Civil War. They became known collectively as "Forty-Eighters."[11] Leaders like Willich were largely responsible for rallying an estimated two hundred thousand men of German birth to enlist in the Union army once the Civil War erupted, a far greater number of recruits than from any other contemporary foreign-born population.[12] Many German American Union officers had fought for freedom in Europe. Their contribution to the Union war effort was significant, even conclusive

on some battlefields. Only a handful of German Americans have achieved adequate recognition for these feats in the face of pervasive bias against immigrants that has persisted in America since the mid-nineteenth century.

The destiny of many radicals in Western societies has been consignment to historical obscurity. For example, few memorials to Thomas Paine exist in the United States despite his enormous influence in kindling the revolution that secured American independence. Though Willich's likeness in bronze or stone appears nowhere in Germany or America, monuments to a few contemporaries like Carl Schurz, Franz Sigel, and Friedrich Hecker grace public spaces in cities and towns where large numbers of German immigrants settled. Virtually all were erected before two world wars in the twentieth century dampened enthusiasm for public tributes to German-born Americans. The collective influence of Willich and his Forty-Eighter peers lives on in their contributions to progressive reform in American public education and as part of a rich cultural milieu of music, art, and literature. As Paine suggested, the Forty-Eighters remade their world in a new country, creating communities that stressed Enlightenment values of free thought and self-improvement.[13]

Most midcentury political exiles like Willich were highly educated radicals from middling or upper ranks of European society. They sustained their commitment to democratic revolution by using similar tactics as in 1848. Many entered journalism, doubling the number of US German-language newspapers in the 1850s in just four years. They started German social clubs called Turnverein, which sprung up all over the country. Willich was involved in a handful of the overtly socialist Turner societies. For these revolutionists, survival of the republican experiment in America, however imperfect, was the last and best hope for a new world order based on freedom, equality, and justice. In America, as in the German states of the Vormärz period, the constituency of Forty-Eighter radical activists was heterogeneous—a huge challenge when crafting a persuasive message and forging political unity.[14]

German immigrants in the 1850s were a diverse lot. Lawyers, professors, doctors, and military veterans left their homeland alongside thousands of craftsmen, skilled artisans, farmers, and common laborers making a new start in America. Newcomers ran the gamut in their religious beliefs and political ideology. Their motives for leaving Germany are difficult to discern, but economic opportunity in a free society was frequently mentioned. Although the overwhelming majority of these immigrants to America hailed from a small region in the German Confederation's southwest, they retained strong identities as Badeners and Rhinelanders, Bavarians and Prussians, Württembergers and Hessians. This is not to mention the many thousands of second and third generation German Americans who had established

affiliations with churches and political parties in the United States. Radical Forty-Eighters like Willich employed a deliberate, conscious strategy to leverage what some historians call a German penchant for joining to construct a new German American ethnic identity. They formed worker organizations, started social clubs, and conducted festivals promoting German cultural superiority, a "German spirit," as Willich described it. That spirit carried with it a moral obligation. It was the destiny of German Americans to continue the work of revolution in their new home and perfect the American republic as an example for humankind.[15]

Americans had thrown off the oppressive yoke of monarchy, yet they later faced the prospect of losing half the country to a plantation aristocracy that considered slavery integral to Southern society. Slaveholding was a threat to republican government and a moral abomination in the eyes of German American radicals like Willich, who were overwhelmingly antislavery and predominantly abolitionist. Unlike many American-born abolitionists, these revolutionaries' opposition to human bondage was not grounded in religious fundamentalism. Rather, it was based on their moral and political principles; many were freethinkers. Willich and his peers understood the inherent conflicts in American political ideology. US citizens preached freedom and equality while owning slaves. German American radicals pressed newcomers, mostly Democrats, to join the newly formed Republican Party following presidential candidate John C. Frémont's adoption of an antislavery platform. While most northerners came to embrace Lincoln's emancipation policy gradually as a war measure, leading German Forty-Eighters viewed the Civil War as a war of slave liberation from the very beginning.[16]

Willich linked free labor ideology to the crusade against chattel slavery. The plight of African slaves reminded Germans of the long tradition of forced servitude in Europe. Although manorial privilege and serfdom was disappearing, mid-nineteenth-century Western European peasants faced staggering social change. Industrial capitalism threatened to turn all but the owners of the means of production into wage slaves. In America's well-publicized rags-to-riches folklore, a worker might finally get a fair shake or even an equal stake in a more perfect republican Union. Willich and many leading German Forty-Eighters wanted to help refine and reform the New World's capitalist juggernaut into a model society where all people could pursue happiness and true social equality. Demise of the American republic would delight the monarchs of Europe but was unconscionable to those who longed for a better world.[17]

Fifty-year-old August Willich had neither wife nor family, no American forefathers to honor, and no wealth or property to defend. Nevertheless, he rushed to help raise a regiment immediately after hearing of the attack on

Fort Sumter. His men affectionately called him "Papa" and "the Old One." William T. Sherman, a man not known for his effusive praise of immigrants, called Willich's all-German regiment "splendid," marveling that they fought in "beautiful style."[18] Willich's accomplishments rank him among the most successful brigade commanders in the Civil War.

Enlisting as a private but immediately appointed adjutant of the all-German Ninth Ohio Infantry, Willich took responsibility for training the volunteers, drawing on his extensive experience in the Prussian Army. Their dexterity on the drill field became the talk of Ohio, earning him promotion to the rank of major. Willich's coolness under fire in leading his skirmishers paved the way for General George McClellan's victory at the Battle of Rich Mountain in western Virginia. He was rewarded with promotion to colonel and command of a new German regiment, the Thirty-Second Indiana Infantry, in August 1861.

Willich made the most of his new command. He created the first dedicated pioneer company in the Union army and made important technical contributions in pontoon bridge building. At the Battle of Rowlett's Station near Munfordville, Kentucky, in December 1861, a portion of his regiment fended off a much larger force of cavalry by deploying a hollow-square defense, killing Colonel Terry of the Texas Rangers and earning an improbable victory. Willich displayed unmatched bravery while leading five successive charges against Confederate forces at Shiloh, changing front nine times. He paused to calm overanxious troops by drilling them in the manual of arms, his back to the enemy amid a shower of hostile fire. Willich's performance at Shiloh earned him promotion to the rank of brigadier general and command of a brigade in what became the Army of the Cumberland.

Willich led from the front, employing innovative tactics in his new role. He was at the focal point of the initial Confederate assault at Stones River, where his division was outnumbered four to one and overrun. Willich was captured and spent several months in the notorious Libby Prison in Richmond before being exchanged. Rejoining his command, he implemented a novel technique called "advance firing," then used it with devastating effect to capture Liberty Gap in June 1863. In September at the Battle of Chickamauga, Willich employed advance firing brigade-wide and added "retreat firing" to his tactical arsenal. His masterful performance in a losing effort earned his brigade the nickname "Iron Brigade of the Cumberland." He followed the capture of Orchard Knob near Chattanooga in November 1863 by being the first brigade to summit Missionary Ridge in one of the most audacious offensive actions of the war.

Willich's combat service ended at Resaca, Georgia, in May 1864, when a

rebel sniper's bullet shattered his right arm, leaving him disabled for life. He subsequently served as post commander at Cincinnati, where he played an instrumental role in limiting arms shipments to Copperheads and Confederate sympathizers in the northwestern border states. Willich led troops from his former brigade through mop-up exercises in Texas shortly after the war ended, but poor health forced him to resign his commission. He received the brevet rank as major general of US volunteers in October 1865.

Willich's military accomplishments helped defeat the slaveholder oligarchy and ensure survival of republican government. It was the great achievement of his life. Just as Paine came on the American scene at the right time and place to inspire British colonists to rebel against their king, Willich and other recent immigrants were well positioned in 1861 to renew the call for freedom through revolution, as they had done in Europe just thirteen years earlier. Willich commanded thousands of ethnic Germans, and many of them, like himself, were committed to nudging the American republic closer to Paine's ideals of human rights and social justice. "Europe, not England, is the parent country of America," Paine insisted. "This new World has been the asylum for persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe."[19] "The cause of America," the patriot said in 1776, "is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."[20] So it was again in 1861. The Union had to prevail, not just for its own sake, but for the benefit of the Western world. Willich was on the same page with America's radical propagandist when Paine wrote, "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good."[21]

In 2018, the first Turner society in America celebrated its 170th anniversary in Cincinnati. Nineteenth-century Turnvereine were much more than community centers for German Americans. Early Turner mottos included *Frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei,* which translated from German reads, "Lively, upright, joyous, and free," and *Mens sana in corpore sano*, Latin for "A sound mind in a sound body." In the years leading up to the Civil War, most Turners were unabashedly socialist in their philosophy and radical in their politics. Over time, their clubs remained important gathering places for Americans of German heritage but surrendered their radicalism to a republic committed to capitalism. Freethinkers dwindled and establishment religion flourished.

However, modern Turners still profess to follow radicals like Paine and Willich when they speak of their core values. Turner author and Cincinnati businessman Ernest Weier, writing of the society's philosophy in the twentieth century, stressed that true liberty was impossible "if one is forced to feel, to think or to act differently from the dictates of his own individual conscience."[22] August Willich believed in that creed. He sacrificed nearly everything to obey the command of his conscience to fight social injustice with pen and sword.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. *Penny Press* (Cincinnati), January 30, 1860.

2. Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine: Firebrand of the Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43.

3. Robert J. Ingersoll, "Thomas Paine," *North American Review* 155 (July 1892): 195.

4. Richard Carwardine, "'Simply a Theist': Herndon on Lincoln's Religion," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 20–21.

5. Moncure D. Conway, *Thomas Paine: A Celebration* (Cincinnati: Dial, 1860), 14.

6. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Philadelphia: W. and T. Bradford, 1776), 87.

7. Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 47–59, 117–29, 211–226, 277–79, 290–301, 336–48.

8. Partial treatments of August Willich's life story abound in biographical summaries, book chapters, journal articles, theses, and online blog postings. The most important of these are: Loyd D. Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966); Rolf Dlubek, "August Willich (1810–1878): Vom preußischen Offizier zum Streiter für die Arbeiteremanzipation auf zwei Kontinenten, "in *Akteure eines Umbruchs. Männer und Frauen der Revolution von 1848/49*, ed. Helmut Bleiber, Walter Schmidt, Susanne Schötz, (Berlin: Trafo Verlag 2003), 923–1004; Joseph R. Reinhart, ed., *August Willich's Gallant Dutchmen: Civil War Letters from the 32nd Indiana Infantry* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006).

9. My perspective that the US Civil War was part of an ongoing international revolution for social justice draws from three important works: Andre M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); and Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2015). See also James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

10. *Evansville (IN) Journal*, August 2, 1866; Andrew Zimmerman, "From the Rhine to the Mississippi: Property, Democracy, and Socialism in the American Civil War," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 1 (March 2015): 3–37.

11. English-language biographies of prominent German Forty-Eighters who became American Civil War Union officers include: Stephen D. Engle, *Yankee Dutchman: The Life of Franz Sigel* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Hans L. Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Sabine Freitag, *Friedrich Hecker: Two Lives for Liberty*, trans. Steven Rowan (Saint Louis: University of Missouri Press, 2006); Mary Bobbitt Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse: A Biography of Major General Peter Osterhaus* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010).

12. Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 523–25.

13. For the best overview on German Forty-Eighters in America, see Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution: The German Forty-Eighters in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952) is dated but useful. A. E. Zucker, ed. *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950) is hagiographic, but it contains important biographical information on dozens of German Forty-Eighters.

14. Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, eds., *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1–7. Kamphoefner makes a strong case for Forty-Eighter leaders advancing social and cultural life among nineteenth-century German Americans but admits that historians debate the extent of the Forty-Eighters' influence on the masses of their less educated ethnic brethren. Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845–80* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Martin W. Öfele, *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863–1867* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); and Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

15. Kathleen Neils Conzen, "German Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity," in *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, ed. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 1:131–47; and Alison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17–41.

16. Two important books that shape my understanding of political alliances among German Forty-Eighters, blacks, and abolitionists are Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists after 1848* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); and Efford, *German Immigrants*. For an understanding of transatlantic antislavery alliances and the intersection between abolitionism and global democratic revolution, see W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

17. To understand the links between labor activism and republican political theory during the Civil War period, see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Mark A. Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

18. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton, 1875), 1:239.

19. Paine, *Common Sense*, 36.

20. Paine, *Common Sense*, 4.

21. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), 59.

22. Gustav Tafel, *The Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War*, ed. and trans. Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Milford, OH: Little Miami, 2010), 81–82.