



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 7, 2011

Scores of Germans Reenact Civil War Battles

A story published recently in PRI certainly knows how to grab a reader's attention: "On a warm spring morning about 50 miles north of Berlin, Union troops and their Confederate rivals prepare for battle."

Seems there is a burgeoning battalion of Germans keen on reenacting the American Civil War.

In a nation where any sort of contemporary martial zeal is viewed with wide-eyed discomfort, there is a bit of disconnected satisfaction in the pantomime of the past --- America's past.



Perhaps, however, there's more of a personal connection between Germans and the War Between the States than is commonly acknowledged. As reported by the author of the PRI piece, participants with whom she spoke reminded (taught?) her that "200,000 Germans had taken part in the fight."

As the song goes, "It was brother fighting brother, father fighting son..." but when the actors are separated by thousands of miles and about 150 years from the fight that separated thousands of American families, which side is favored? According to the story, "more people want to be on the Confederate side."

Regardless of the possible motives behind the preference for the Confederacy, most of the 19th Century Germans who actually fought in the Civil War were aligned with the presently unpopular Union side.

"Take the [Germans] out of the Union Army and we could whip the Yankees easily," Robert E. Lee allegedly remarked.

While there is some debate as to the authenticity of that remark, as reported in an [article](#) published in *The Atlantic*, the actual figures from the era support Lee's supposed assessment of the situation.

By one estimate, 176,817 [Germans] donned the army blue, half again as many as their share of the overall population would have predicted. Other reliable estimates range as high as 216,000. And adding in the descendants of earlier generations of German immigrants would more than triple that total. The Germans, one contemporary judged, understood "from the beginning, the aim and the end of the civil war, [and] they have embraced the cause of the Union and emancipation with an ardor and a passion."

The piece provided additional demographic evidence of the reason behind the overwhelming German alliance with the Union:

Less than 10 percent of the Germans immigrants in the United States, scarcely 70,000, dwelt in the entire territory controlled by the Confederacy at the outbreak of the war. Many fled north, with perhaps 2,000 joining the Union Army. Hundreds of those who remained petitioned the consuls of German states for protection from the draft. There were certainly some ardent secessionists, and even a few slaveholders, and between 3,500 and 7,000 Germans may have



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served in the Confederate Army. But of that number, many were conscripted, a large number deserted, and some mutinied. "The German minority of the South," one scholar concluded, "was all but insignificant politically, economically, and militarily during the American Civil War."

In light of those historic statistics, what compels modern Germans to don the gray and shun the blue? The PRI piece explains: "A lot of fantasies have built up around the Confederacy; thanks to the movie *Gone with the Wind*, it is a staple of German popular culture."

While there is no arguing about the popularity (in Europe and America) of the movie version of Margaret Mitchell's novel, there is likely something more basic, something more universal behind the German identification with the losing side of the Civil War. The nobility associated with struggling against perceived tyrants and the support for the underdog are probably just as responsible for the preference as any other factor.

Of course, there are those who see something far more sinister behind the recruiting success of the Confederacy in Germany.

Reports *The Atlantic*:

Wolfgang Hochbruck, a Professor of American Studies at the University of Freiburg and a Union reenactor, is less charitable. "I think some of the Confederate reenactors in Germany are acting out Nazi fantasies of racial superiority," he told author Tony Horwitz. "They are obsessed with your war because they cannot celebrate their own vanquished racists." It's an unsettling thought.

What is more unsettling is that there are professors of "American Studies" in Germany obsessed themselves with a nuanced reduction of the Confederacy States of America to nothing more than a movement motivated by a twisted sense of "racial superiority."

Perhaps our Teutonic cousins are educated enough to disregard this professor's historically unsubstantiated academic assessment of the Confederacy and are motivated more simply by an appreciation for the preservation of history and good, clean, racially unspoiled sparring.



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