

make for a useful addition to courses that focus on borderlands, transnationalism, the state, or social movements, not to mention U.S. or Mexican history.

The Germans of New York's Kleindeutschland

Ziegler-McPherson, Christina. *The Great Disappearing Act: Germans in New York City, 1880–1930*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022. 238 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1978823198; \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1978823181.

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Prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the largest loss of life in New York City occurred when the *General Slocum* steamboat burned in the East River on June 15, 1904. On board were over one-thousand, three-hundred passengers, mostly German Americans on their way to an annual church picnic. As the *Slocum* sailed up the river, a fire started below deck that caused pandemonium throughout the ship. Passengers, many of whom could not swim, frantically grabbed defective life vests and leapt overboard. Of the over one thousand people who died in the water, the majority were women and children from Kleindeutschland, a German neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

It has long been thought that the tragedy was too much to bear for the German community, causing its inhabitants to abandon Kleindeutschland in an attempt to start their lives over elsewhere. Christina Ziegler-McPherson, in *The Great Disappearing Act*, seeks to excavate this now forgotten former German enclave. She traces Kleindeutschland's mid- to late-nineteenth-century rise and charts its subsequent decline as Germans dispersed to other parts of the city and assimilated into Anglo-American culture in the early twentieth century. For Ziegler-McPherson, though, it is World War I that is to blame for the disappearance of Germans in New York, not the *General Slocum* disaster.

In 1880, Kleindeutschland was a community of German immigrants and their descendants. Largely self-sufficient, its residents had little reason to travel outside the neighborhood to meet their basic needs. It contained thousands of German stores, thousands of social clubs, eight hundred beer gardens, over thirty churches and synagogues, and twenty German language periodicals. The social clubs, or vereine, were the foundation of German identity, with the singing societies (gesangvereine) providing pride of place. These mostly male groups routinely performed German folk songs and operas. The Liederkranz club was one of the largest, with fifteen-hundred members hailing from the community's business and political class. Working-class Germans had their own gesangvereine, such as the socialist Karl Marx's Singing Society. There were even forty

anarchist choirs, proof that, according to Ziegler, “anarchists enjoyed music as much as capitalists” (16).

Vereine of all types often had their meetings in bars, sometimes on Sundays and usually with women and children in tow. Families were also a constant presence at the beer gardens. The fact that these drinking spots were not only family friendly establishments but that they served alcohol on Sundays scandalized a puritan-minded Anglo-American elite. These contrasting attitudes toward alcohol (concerning “how, when, and with whom one drank”) were a striking cultural difference between German and British Americans, and attempts to impose prohibition exacerbated tensions (22).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, some upwardly mobile German Americans left Kleindeutschland to expand their businesses, helping to establish new satellite communities in the process. This is true of George Ehret and Carl Pfizer, who would go on to shape the American beer and pharmaceutical industries. Ehret operated the largest brewery in the United States in northeastern Manhattan’s Yorkville, producing 1.5 percent of the country’s beer. By century’s end, German-style lager replaced English ale as Americans’ beer of choice and German business practices dominated the industry. Pfizer opened a factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1849, which manufactured “pure chemicals” such as iodine and mercury compounds (44). Like Ehret, Pfizer was not content to do business with only Germans and successfully marketed his product to English-speaking doctors and pharmacists.

Here, Ziegler-McPherson’s portrait of Kleindeutschland and its satellites could have benefitted from the insights of the burgeoning field of sensory history. What did the streets and beer halls *sound* like as Germans worked, drank, and sang? What did the laborers *smell* and *feel* while inside a Williamsburg pharmaceutical factory? I appreciated her account of the temperature extremes that brewery workers were exposed to as they moved back and forth between “cold icehouse, cool storage, warm mashing room, and hot brew house,” hauling ice blocks and stirring boiling liquids (39). Additional material like this would have helped to foreground the “historical richness” of everyday life in German New York.¹

Surprisingly, despite their numbers (they were 25 percent of the population in 1886), Germans never matched the political power of the Irish. There was no German equivalent to the Tammany Hall Democratic machine. The community was too divided by class, religion, and region of origin to consistently unite as a political bloc. Occasionally, though, despite being shut out of most patronage appointments, German New Yorkers produced noted politicians of their own, such as Robert Wagner who, over the course of his long career, served in both the New York State Senate and the United States Senate.

When the *General Slocum* sank in 1904, it was indeed traumatic for the surviving Germans of Kleindeutschland. However, Ziegler-McPherson claims the disaster did not trigger a widespread exodus as is commonly believed. The examples of Pfizer and Ehret demonstrate that people had started to leave the neighborhood and integrate into the dominant English-speaking culture well before the steamboat fire. Furthermore, according to the author, the majority of survivors actually chose to remain in Kleindeutschland.

For Ziegler-McPherson, it was the anti-German hysteria of World War I (and its accompanying censorship, discrimination, and vigilante violence) that fostered the loss of

¹“Historical richness” is a term used by Brian Ladd in *The Streets of Europe: The Sights, Sounds, and Smells That Shaped Its Great Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 4.

a visible German presence in the city, what she calls the “Great Disappearing Act.” Instead of a disappearance, though, she seems to be describing the acceleration of what had been, up until the war, a gradual assimilation process. The German language was rarely heard on the postwar streets of New York, but Germans themselves did not disappear and, in fact, attempted to maintain some outward displays of their culture.

Feminist Friendships and Greenwich Village’s Heterodoxy Club

Scutts, Joanna. *Hotbed: Bohemian Greenwich Village and the Secret Club that Sparked Modern Feminism*. New York: Seal Press, 2022. 416 pp. \$30.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1541647176.

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When the Heterodoxy Club began meeting in 1912, the term “feminism” was relatively new. The word, as the club’s founder Marie Jenney Howe believed, identified a “changed psychology” stemming from the “creation of a new consciousness in women.”¹ A shared belief in this new attitude of mind called feminism brought together some of the era’s most recognizable women in the heart of Greenwich Village. In her new history of the club, *Hotbed: Bohemian Greenwich Village and the Secret Club that Sparked Modern Feminism*, literary critic and cultural historian Joanna Scutts writes that when the women of Heterodoxy came together, they were not trying to do anything—they just wanted to talk about “the world and their place in it” (1).

The Heterodoxy Club allowed members, all of whom were women, to engage in the free and frank discussion of ideas. Meetings took place on a biweekly basis, except during the summer months when most members left the city. They met first in public, in restaurants such as Polly’s or the meeting spaces of the Liberal Club, and then in private, meeting in members’ apartments for much of the 1920s. Following a group luncheon, members engaged in hours of informal discussion on a topic agreed upon at the last meeting. Topics ranged from philosophical considerations of the abstract mysteries of the universe to the immediate practical politics of women’s suffrage, birth control, workers’ rights, and economic independence. Regardless, the discussions always concerned women.

By the 1920s, the Heterodoxy Club’s membership roll read as a veritable “who’s who” of Progressive Era women’s history, a self-described gathering of “the most unruly and

¹Marie Jenney Howe, “Feminism,” *New Review*, August 1914.