

## The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War. A Global History

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**Bericht von:** Matthew Karp, American Academy of Arts and Sciences

A year after the first „Transnational Significance of the American Civil War“ conference in Jena, this meeting brought together some of the original participants and a fresh group of historians, who gathered in Washington, DC to reevaluate the promise of transnational approaches to the history of the American Civil War. After BRITTA WALDSCHMIDT-NELSON (Washington, DC) welcomed the participants to the German Historical Institute, JÖRG NAGLER (Jena) opened the proceedings by remarking that the conference program reflected many of the scholarly desiderata that emerged in Jena, including an emphasis on the war’s global impact, both in the mid-nineteenth century and over the *longue durée*, and the relationship between the war, the British Empire, and the world beyond Europe. In his opening remarks, DON DOYLE (Columbus) observed that in contrast to the domestic and social history preoccupations of Civil War scholarship in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, historians in the 21st century have turned back toward an international approach. Finally, MARCUS GRÄSER (Linz) drew attention to the meeting as a collaboration of both U.S.- and European-based scholars of the Civil War, and considered what different perspectives non-American scholars might bring to the subject.

To begin the first panel, on revolution and nation-building in a comparative perspective, TIZIANO BONAZZI (Bologna) addressed a larger historical parallel between the Civil War era United States and Italy during the time of the *Risorgimento*. Bonazzi noted that despite their obvious differences in economic development, after 1861 the political leadership in both Italy and the United States embarked on a process of liberal nation-building.

The new Italian state’s war on the obstreperous and violent southern banditti, Bonazzi argued, shared a „structural affinity“ with the process of Reconstruction in the United States-as did the eventual political settlement in both nations, which built a stronger central government at the cost of excluding large swathes of the population from political participation.

BRUCE LEVINE’s (Urbana-Champaign) keynote address took up the question of the American Civil War’s place in the „age of revolutions.“ Levine began by stressing the indisputably revolutionary experience of the Civil War, and especially its destruction of slavery and the southern Slave Power. Like their counterparts in the European revolutions, the Civil War’s eventual revolutionaries began with a strictly limited set of ends and means. But Lincoln’s disinclination to turn the war into „an instrument of social revolution“ gradually dissolved under the pressure of military conflict and slaveholding intransigence. Unlike its European counterparts, Levine observed, the escalation of the Civil War’s social revolution – formalized in Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation – did not feature a radical transformation in political leadership. Although blacks were never at the heart of the Republicans’ constituency, and the Civil War contained its own Thermidor, in the conservative retreats and failures of Reconstruction, Levine concluded, the war’s revolutionary impact was not entirely effaced: as in the case of the European revolutions, the Old Regime never again returned in full.

Friday morning’s proceedings began with HARTMUT KEIL (Leipzig) and ALISON EFFORD (Milwaukee) presenting papers that considered the political odyssey of German-American immigrants during the Civil War era. Keil argued that the experience of the Civil War transformed German-American liberal and radical attitudes, reorienting the immigrants away from political concerns in their homeland and toward their own role in American politics. Efford’s paper assessed the place of African-Americans in the pluralistic democracy that German-American immigrants sought to build in the Civil War era U.S. The Germans’ conception of plural-

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ism was vulnerable to racial distinctions, and may have helped weaken both the Fifteenth Amendment and the white North's commitment to blacks during Reconstruction.

The second panel on Friday morning took up the question of the American Civil War's larger relationship with global slavery. MICHAEL MANN (Berlin) urged U.S. Civil War historians to avoid the temptation to see the global nineteenth century as an „Age of Emancipation,” or a simple triumph of modern free wage labor. In fact the most important development between 1840 and 1880, Mann argued, was the „rearrangement of labor on a global scale.” From the perspective of the Indian Ocean, especially, the perpetuation of slavery in East Africa, the spread of bound Indian „coolie” labor throughout the British Empire, and the increasing importance of convict transport reaffirmed the diversity and complexity of this evolving global picture. MATTHEW KARP's (Cambridge, MA) paper concentrated on Southern slaveholders who may have sharply criticized imperial coolie and apprentice labor in specific instances, but from a larger perspective saw these systems as part of a wider European recognition that coerced labor and racial hierarchy were unavoidable features of the nineteenth century world economy. Ultimately, Karp concluded, the rise of the multiple labor market in the 1850s only fortified Southern elites' confidence in the future of their own slave system.

A third Friday panel sought to further relate Civil War era politics of race, slavery, and emancipation to contemporaneous global developments. ANDREW ZIMMERMAN (Washington, DC) argued that transatlantic plebian radicalism represented a critical and overlooked component in the politics of the U.S. Civil War. Although the power of bourgeois elites ultimately enclosed these new commons, any transnational understanding of the Civil War era must account for the significant ideological connections between anti-slavery, anti-racist, and plebian radical actors on both sides of the Atlantic. ANDRE FLECHE (Castleton), meanwhile, returned the discussion to the global confidence of conservative slaveholding elites in 1861. Tracing Southern enthusiasm for Napoleon III's

imperial invasion of Mexico, Fleche stressed the irreducible white supremacy at the heart of Confederate nationalism, which surpassed any competing commitments to liberalism, republicanism, or even the Monroe Doctrine.

After lunch, the conference reconvened with a panel that examined the direct reverberations of Civil War events and actors in the wider world. MARTHA HODES (New York) reviewed international responses to Abraham Lincoln's assassination and suggested that the emphasis on „unity” and „universal grief” for Lincoln previewed the white North's later turn toward sectional reconciliation at the expense of black freedom. Did emotional responses, Hodes asked, „form the raw beginnings” of the political movement that led to white reunion and the betrayal of black equality? JAY SEXTON (Oxford) examined former Secretary of State William Seward's remarkable twenty-month global tour, from 1869 to 1871. The Secretary of State's materialist conception of „civilization” in the nineteenth century, Sexton argued, captured his nationalist view of globalization, but also reflected the ways that postwar American expansion was conditioned by British imperial power.

The final panel on Friday afternoon addressed religion and gender in the Civil War from a transnational perspective. DAVID THOMSON's (Athens) exploration of ministerial influence on Union diplomacy traced the ways that the North's religious envoys abroad turned sharply from the rhetoric of „holy fraternity” and embraced the language of „righteous violence.” STEPHANIE MCCURRY's (Philadelphia) paper argued that nineteenth century nationalism required newly-built states to expand the body politic in order to access male bodies for military service – but what were the gender consequences of this fraternal nationalism? Examining the evolution of Francis Lieber's code of war, McCurry noted that the Union's political and intellectual leadership was forced to revise its 1861 assumption that women were necessarily outside the domain of war.

The participants reunited on Saturday morning for a final panel, which assessed the transnational meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation. Don Doyle's paper began by noting Great Britain's skeptical reaction

to the announcement of Emancipation in the fall of 1862. Popular demonstrations in London, on behalf of the imprisoned Garibaldi, discouraged British conservatives from sympathizing with the slaveholding Confederacy, and demonstrated the transatlantic connections between democratic politics in the 1860s. HOWARD JONES (Tuscaloosa), meanwhile, addressed the basic power politics that shaped the diplomacy of emancipation on both sides of the Atlantic. Emancipation was above all a military decision made for political reasons, and one that ultimately strengthened the cause of the Union both at home and abroad.

The proceedings concluded with a roundtable discussion featuring five panelists. Jörg Nagler stressed the necessity of „de-provincializing“ the Civil War and identifying new connections in an entangled world. Marcus Gräser observed that the Civil War was in fact an ideal test case of the possibilities of a transnational approach, given how firmly it is rooted in the master narrative of American national history. Martha Hodes identified five aspects of a transnational history of the Civil War that required further contemplation: time, and the chronological boundaries of the Civil War era; space, and whether the war was a truly global or a merely Atlantic event; visions, and how contemporary actors themselves understood the war's transnational implications; voices, and whose histories are selected and omitted by a global perspective; and readers, or whether an American readership is really willing to swallow a global view on the Civil War. MISCHA HONECK (Washington, DC) noted the instability of political labels during the tumultuous Civil War era, and proposed that further investigation into the material culture of the era – that is, the dissemination of Garibaldi shirts from South America to South Carolina – might yield a transnational history that includes the experiences and activities of ordinary people. SVEN BECKERT (Cambridge, MA) stressed the necessity of understanding the Civil War not merely as a cause or result of overseas events, but a critical instance of the larger transformations of the global nineteenth century. The two most fundamental of these, he argued,

were the consolidation of the nation-state and the spread of capitalist social relations throughout the world, in both industrial centers and the countryside. Michael Mann wondered if „global history“ was really necessary to understand the old Atlantic story of Euro-American state formation. The original promise of transnational history was that it reached beyond the nation-state – to make good on that promise, he argued, historians must break out of their comfortable confines of expertise, and shift perspective to a wider, unfamiliar global view.

This international conference successfully investigated the transnational significance and ramifications of the American Civil War in a global context. The Importance of the American Civil War for American History is evident, but the conflict between the North and South furthermore can be seen as a primary example of nearly universal structural conflicts that were typical for the nineteenth century: first, the tension between local/regional actors and the ambitious nation state, second, the alternative social, economic, and political models of free labor in industrial capitalism and unfree labor in agrarian societies based on slavery and serfdom. This international dimension of the conflict not only sheds light on previously unrecognized elements of the story, it also helps to cast central, well known aspects of the conflict in a new light as well. The Civil War occurred within some transnational fields of conflict that not only contributed to its outbreak but also influenced its course and had significant international repercussions: the worldwide spread of cotton production as a result of the blockaded cotton export from the South was a significant outcome of the War, and the traditional fixation of the British textile industry on Southern cotton was part of the Southern secessionist's mindset, insofar as this privileged economic relationship seemed to promise not only economic security but also diplomatic recognition. That this recognition failed to appear was then part of the story of the defeat of the Confederate States.

#### **Conference Overview:**

*Panel 1: Revolution and Nation Building in a Comparative Perspective*

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Chair: Don Doyle

Tiziano Bonazzi (University of Bologna): 1861 and After: Italy, the US and the Pangs of the Liberal Nation

*Keynote Address*

Bruce Levine (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): The American Civil War and the Age of Revolutions

*Panel 2: The Transnational Meaning of Ethnicity*

Chair: Mischa Honeck (GHI)

Alison Efford (Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin): Germans, African Americans and citizenship during Reconstruction

Hartmut Keil (Universität Leipzig): Francis Lieber and American Nationalism in the American Civil War

*Panel 3: Global Emancipations I*

Chair: Richard Wetzell (GHI)

Michael Mann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Regulating the Labour Market 1840-70: A Global Perspective from British India

Matthew Karp (University of Pennsylvania): „There Is a Higher Law than the ‘Higher Law’”: Coolie Labor in the Proslavery Imagination

*Panel 4: Global Emancipations II*

Chair: Marcus Gräser

Andrew Zimmermann (George Washington University): Africa and the American Civil War

Andre M. Fleche (Castleton State College): Race and Revolution: Confederate Nationalism in a Global Context

*Panel 5: The World and the American Civil War*

Chair: Jörg Nagler

Martha Hodes (New York University): Overseas Responses to Lincoln’s Assassination: The Meaning of the War in Transnational Perspective

Jay Sexton (Corpus Christi College, Oxford):

William H. Seward in the World

*Panel 6: Religion and Gender and the Civil War in a Transnational Perspective*

Chair: Mark Stoneman (GHI)

David Thomson (University of Georgia): ‘The Will of God Prevails’: Ministerial Influence on Union Diplomacy

Stephanie McCurry (University of Pennsylvania): Militarism and Democracy: Gender and Politics in the American Civil War

*Panel 7: The Transnational Meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation*

Chair: Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI)

Don Doyle (University of South Carolina, Columbia): The Emancipation Proclamation in a Transnational Context

Howard Jones (University of Alabama): The Emancipation Proclamation and its Impact on Union Diplomacy

Tagungsbericht *The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War. A Global History*. 20.09.2012–22.09.2012, Washington, DC, in: H-Soz-Kult 23.01.2013.