

The Lincoln Image in Germany

by Jörg Nagler

This essay investigates the enduring fascination with the sixteenth President of the United States in Germany. In general, his legacy and its evaluation changed in relation to the determinate historical contexts, beginning with the monarchical system, extending through the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and now the Federal Republic of Germany. Certain social and political individuals/groups in Germany used the image and iconography of Lincoln as a projection screen to support their own political objectives. Although there were always multiple layers of Lincoln representations in Germany, the dominant images were: the national unifier, the libertarian universalist, the emancipator, the defender of moral values, the modernizer, the democrat who used the power of the democratic state, the egalitarian self-made man from humble origins, and the defender of social justice and workingmen's rights.

- 1 At the Lincoln Sesquicentennial celebrations on February 12, 1959, in the midst of the Cold War, the Mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt, delivered the keynote address in Springfield, Illinois, with a large banner behind him inscribed: "A House divided against itself cannot stand." Envoys from twenty nations listened while he stressed that "the German people acknowledged Lincoln's dictum that it was the duty of the people never to entrust to any hands but their own the preservation of their liberties" (*New York Times* 13 Feb. 1959: 21). For the future Chancellor of the German Federal Republic and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Lincoln served as a symbolic inspiration to overcome a divided Germany, since the sixteenth President succeeded in bringing together a new nation based on justice and freedom. However, Brandt also stressed Lincoln the internationalist:

But this man does not belong to you alone, my friends. He belongs to all of us, above all to our young people, and he lives in the hearts of mankind everywhere. In Abraham Lincoln, intellectual force was matched with moral strength. He understood the spirit as well as the needs of his time; and he was possessed of that pragmatic way of thinking which is conducive to successful action and which always stands the test if it is anchored in firm convictions. (*New York Times* 13 Feb. 1959: 21)

- 2 One aspect of Lincoln's legacy Brandt mentioned in his speech was most important to him, and it reflected also the new American interpretation of Lincoln after the Second World War: Lincoln as a moral leader and apostle of the international struggle for freedom, an early advocate for human rights.
- 3 The themes addressed by Brandt help explain the enduring fascination with the sixteenth President in Germany. They also signal how historically variable this fascination was. Lincoln's legacy and its evaluation changed over time. Certain social and political individuals/groups in Germany used the image and iconography of Lincoln to support their own political objectives. Although there were always multiple layers of Lincoln representations in Germany, the dominant images were: the national unifier, the libertarian universalist, the emancipator, the defender of moral values, the modernizer, the democrat who used the power of the democratic state, the egalitarian self-made man from humble origins, and the defender of social justice and workingmen's rights.

Lincoln, Bismarck, and Nation Building

- 4 Lincoln's presidency coincided with [Bismarck's](#) nation-building efforts. Once Germany became united in 1870–1871 in the context of the Franco-Prussian War, Lincoln the nation-builder became firmly

entrenched in German public consciousness. Due to these parallel nation-building processes, the German fascination with the American Civil War is understandable, and since Lincoln as unifier is inherently linked with this conflict, he became well-known to Germans, especially politicians and writers. Politically, Prussia and the German states had overwhelmingly supported the Union in the American Civil War.

- 5 Besides the image of the strong savior of the nation, Lincoln also was perceived as the defender of freedom and democracy by social and political groups that yearned for a more free and democratic society in Germany. Ever since the revolution of 1848–1849 when revolutionaries in the first parliament in Frankfurt called the United States the “ideal republic,” American political developments were closely observed by pro-democratic groups, facilitated through the abundant information Germany received through German Americans. This tradition of admiration for the liberal-republican American democracy was especially evident among German socialists and social democrats after the revolution of 1848–1849. They then perceived the American Civil War as a social revolution and class struggle, and Lincoln became a prime symbol for this phenomenon, particularly as he had called free laborers “the bulwark of democracy.”
- 6 Ever since the famous letter from Karl Marx to Abraham Lincoln congratulating him on his re-election in 1864, a tradition among German socialists and social democrats took root that Abraham Lincoln stood for a successful class struggle that had ended slavery and the influence of the “planter class.” The German publication of Marx’s letter by Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, laid the foundation for widespread admiration of Lincoln by the intellectuals of the party elite but also among the rank and file of the German labor movement. This admiration lasted well into the 20th Century—as seen in the case of Willy Brandt.

German Migration and Its Influence on Lincoln’s Perception in Germany

- 7 When we consider the channels of communication as a pivotal part of explaining how the Lincoln image was shaped worldwide, the German case indeed seems to be exceptional. In general, a positive image of the United States existed in Germany. The United States became a magnet for millions of German emigrants due to both its democratic system and the economic opportunities it offered. Due to the mass migrations from the German states between 1850 and 1860 (close to one million)—and then again in the second half of the nineteenth century when approximately four million Germans emigrated to the United States—the ties between the two countries were very close. At the eve of the First World War close to twenty percent of the American population had been born in Germany. Over two hundred million letters poured over the Atlantic back to Germany where families learned about the general developments of the United States, the effects of Civil War, and also about Lincoln, and hence coined the Lincoln image.
- 8 Along with the transatlantic migration of people with their cultural baggage, one finds the mutual influence of the transatlantic migration of ideas and ideologies. Returning emigrants helped shape German images and information about the United States including the Lincoln image. But even more important for the transfer of information was the ‘hands on’ experience of approximately 200,000 German American Union soldiers who served Lincoln as their president and wartime leader. According to a realistic estimate they sent approximately 500,000 letters home and thus contributed to the shaping of a positive Lincoln image in the country they had left behind.
- 9 Since we lack empirical data so far on how ordinary Germans perceived Abraham Lincoln, we need to concentrate more on intellectual rather than on social history. Unfortunately, we lack opinion polls on Lincoln significance in Germany—what Barry Schwartz has done for the American side (“Iconography”)—but we have at least evidence from published opinions and, more important, from Lincoln biographies. Biographies can serve as a measuring stick for popularity or the intensity of knowledge concerning a specific historical person. No other country, with the exception of China, has produced more Lincoln biographies—apart from the USA—than Germany. In the years since his assassination, ninety biographies have been published in Germany, written by historians, journalists and politicians. Some of these writers knew Lincoln very well, including [Carl Schurz](#), the political émigré of the failed revolution of

1848–1849 who became a close friend of Lincoln and a Union Army General. When we measure the frequency with which these biographies were published, the period right after Lincoln’s assassination and the democratic periods of the Weimar Republic and the post-war Federal Republic of Germany stand out. Of the ninety Lincoln biographies published in the German language, thirty-nine are translations. Some of the German works published in Germany were written by German Americans.

- 10 When we look at the reasons for the overall German admiration of Lincoln—which is also reflected in the countless streets, public spaces and schools that are named after Old Abe—we hence need to consider the transatlantic ties between Germany and the United States that were to a great extent established by the German mass immigration in the nineteenth century. The first big wave of German emigration of the 1850s had taken place in the age of liberal reform and sometimes revolutionary movements, when Lincoln was regarded with great interest and passion. Lincoln’s well-known relationships with highly politicized German Americans, such as Carl Schurz, Gustav Körner ([Gustave Koerner](#)), his private secretary [John Nicolay](#), and [Francis Lieber](#) seem to have spurred the general interest in Lincoln in Germany, since they published information on him. At the beginning of the twentieth century, filiopietistic German American historians even claimed that Lincoln had German ancestry (Hennighausen).
- 11 In this patrimonial spirit, the German Ambassador to the United States, Count von Bernstorff delivered a commemorative speech entitled “Lincoln as Germany Regarded Him” on Abraham Lincoln’s 104th birthday, February 12, 1913, before the joint assembly of the Illinois legislature and other invited guests in the State Armory in Springfield—exactly the venue where Willy Brandt would present his speech forty-six years later. As Brandt would later do, the ambassador stressed the image of a strong national leader with a never-relenting will for national unity and freedom. Bernstorff, however, also stressed those character qualities which he deemed compatible with the German disposition—an interesting attempt at bridge-building a few years before the United States and Germany became enemies in the First World War (*New York Times* 13 Feb. 1913: 5; Nagler, “Lincolns Image” 243).

Lincoln’s Image in the Weimar Republic

- 12 The Weimar Republic was the first functioning democratic state in Germany. It offers an interesting case study for the reception of Lincoln in Germany because both its supporters and detractors talked about Americanization, modernization and westernization. When [Philipp Scheidemann](#), the German Social Democratic politician who was born in the year of Lincoln’s assassination, proclaimed the German Republic on November 9, 1918, he adapted Lincoln’s dictum from the Gettysburg Address, “All for the people and by the people” (Nagler, “Lincoln’s Image” 245). Scheidemann, who indeed venerated Lincoln, became the second chancellor of the Weimar Republic under President [Friedrich Ebert](#) and later visited Lincoln’s tomb in Springfield during his lecture tour in the United States in 1925. Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, first president of the Weimar Republic, was considered post mortem “the Abraham Lincoln of German history” for his role in preserving German union in the first months after the First World War (Nagler, “Lincoln’s Image” 245). When Ebert died prematurely in 1925, [Theodor Heuss](#), a liberal member of the Reichstag during the Weimar Republic who subsequently served as the first President of the Federal German Republic, eulogized his predecessor in these terms. Heuss saw Lincoln and Ebert as self-made men who were disciplined enough to climb the social ladder and master the national crises they faced (Heuss 178).
- 13 The cultural and economic rapprochement between the Weimar Republic and the United States in 1920s offered perhaps the most fruitful ground for Lincoln reception in Germany. The Rockefeller Foundation realized that the ties between the United States and the fledgling German democracy needed support when it financed the German Abraham Lincoln Stiftung, founded in 1927. In its rather short existence (1927–1934) this foundation promoted the democratization and especially supported educational reforms as a basis for a more open society. The name of the advisers to the Abraham Lincoln Stiftung and its scholarship recipients indeed reads like the German ‘Who’s Who’ of the intellectual and progressive elite; the artists and educators associated with the Stiftung included [Walter Gropius](#), [Herman Hesse](#), [Paul Tillich](#), [Kurt Hahn](#), and [Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy](#). Some of them later joined the resistance

to the Nazi regime, were persecuted or emigrated to the United States (Richardson).

Emil Ludwig's Lincoln Biography of 1930

- 14 Of all the Lincoln biographies written during the Weimar Republic and even beyond, the one written by [Emil Ludwig](#) in 1930 with almost 600 pages is the most remarkable. It was simultaneously published in Germany and the United States. Internationally, Ludwig was seen as a “representative of the new Germany” due to his strong criticism of right wing groups and militarism. A few days before Lincoln’s Birthday 1930, the *New York Times* provided three full pages for an article by Ludwig entitled “A New Lincoln: A World Figure” (9 Feb. 1930: SM1). This article sheds light on the German Lincoln image as Ludwig perceived it. Ludwig courageously challenged the quality of the prime historical German figure Bismarck, who had become a mythical figure like Lincoln: “But he [Lincoln] did not lie in the knowledge which he acquired slowly and which placed him upon the Olympus of history. It was precisely these peculiarly American qualities, products of the soil and essentially simple, which made him so different from all the statesmen Europe produced in the nineteenth century.” With his Lincoln biography, Ludwig attempted to inspire his German readership to believe in the “potentialities of democracy” at the moment his country was slipping into authoritarianism (Nagler, “Lincoln’s Image” 246–47).

The Cold War

- 15 Freedom became the central term of the American confrontation with communism in the Cold War, and when Americans looked back to their historical defenders of freedom, Lincoln seemed like the ideal figurehead to represent freedom to the world. As Barry Schwartz has rightly emphasized, this was a time when Lincoln became “a major political export” (*Abraham Lincoln* 97.)
- 16 A real boost in the public perception and availability of resources on Lincoln occurred through the concentrated efforts of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and Voice of America, both of which focused on Germany as a “front nation” in the Cold War. Numerous diverse activities including lecture series, films, book gifts and official ceremonies helped spread the word of the Great Emancipator in the fight against communism, especially during the Lincoln Sesquicentennial. Ceremonies were held on Lincoln’s Birthday and plans formulated to make a life-size, permanent display log cabin replica a permanent exhibit in West Berlin—in conjunction with Mayor Willy Brandt’s return from his successful trip to the United States. More than a half-million envelopes carrying a Lincoln imprint were produced and used throughout that year. Brandt’s 1959 Lincoln speech in Springfield was widely distributed throughout Germany. In addition, a film of his Springfield visit was presented in many public showings (*Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial* 125).
- 17 Like Lincoln, Brandt was a self-made-man who had worked himself up the social ladder; they both possessed a common work ethic, industriousness, honesty, humility, and authenticity. Brandt and later chancellor Helmut Schmidt quoted Lincoln in Parliament and during their speaking tours through the GDR in 1989. Brandt’s continuous references to Lincoln were a conscious political strategy to increase his own positive political image in Germany, an attempt to enhance his popularity, especially among educated Germans.
- 18 In 1989, shortly before German reunification, the former chancellor often visited the German Democratic Republic. In his speeches and talks he again cited Lincoln’s words “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” For Brandt speaking at that historical moment, Lincoln now stood more for national unity than for the rights of workingmen (with which Social Democrats normally associated Lincoln). “In all the years I have read and thought about Lincoln,” said Brandt in 1989, “I always was fascinated by him, because he was a visionary and pragmatist at the same time.” These qualities, according to Brandt, were needed to solve the German question. The “house divided” metaphor was applied by Brandt to various historically specific German circumstances (Leinemann; Brandt).

After German Unification

- 19 In 1998, Egon Bahr, former German Federal Minister for Special Affairs and close associate of Brandt, delivered a lecture honoring the former chancellor in Berlin. He quoted a Brandt statement from 1966: “A people cannot live together permanently—without losing its inner balance—without first saying yes to its fatherland.”
- 20 As Bahr added, this was the Brandt version of the often used “house divided” quotation from Lincoln. Bahr gave this Brandt quotation a contemporary meaning when he emphasized it nine years after reunification, even though the mentality and social reality of both Germanies had remained so different (Bahr).
- 21 With the initial German “Obama fever,” Obama’s frequent references to Lincoln and the coincidence of Obama’s inauguration and the Lincoln Bicentennial, Germans renewed their interest and fascination with Lincoln. In 2009, three new major Lincoln biographies were published. Willy Brandt was right when he emphasized fifty-six years ago in Springfield that Lincoln “does not belong to [Americans] alone, he belongs to all of us [...]” (*New York Times* 13 Feb. 1959: 21).

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