Since the turn of the twenty-first century, historians have increasingly adopted a transnational approach to the Civil War. They situate America’s sectional conflict within a larger and exceptionally violent contemporary process: the worldwide consolidation of liberal nationalism in the nineteenth century. One recent thread in transnational histories of the Civil War connects the rise and fall of Europe’s 1848–49 democratic uprising and America’s sectional crisis and the development of liberal nationalism on both continents. This essay examines the links historians have made between the European revolutions of 1848 and the U.S. Civil War and points out research opportunities for scholars seeking new ways to examine this well-trodden period of American history.

Far more than most U.S. historians, Thomas Bender embeds his historical narratives within an expansive global framework. In his discussion of the links between 1848—the scholarly shorthand used to describe the rise and fall of the continent’s democratic revolutions—and the Civil War, Bender argues the worldwide development of liberal government and nationalist sentiment that started in Europe played a central role in shaping the next two decades of world history. The American Civil War, he concludes, “cannot be separated from these larger movements.” Framing the Civil War within the larger global processes of the time, he suggests, offers historians far greater “explanatory power” than histories framing this conflict as an exceptional nation-bound event separated from the flow of larger international developments.

The recent antiwar turn in Civil War scholarship, for example, does not take into account the fact that violent conflict was a tragic but strikingly commonplace component of the worldwide process of liberal nation-building during the mid-nineteenth century. The “new revisionists” such as David Goldfield, Harry Stout, and Michael Fellman argue that the Civil War could have been avoided if, somehow, the polarizing influence of
sectional politics, fueled by evangelical Christian fervor, had been replaced by calm and rational discussion about contentious issues such as the future of American slavery. Goldfield, for instance, declares that the Civil War was “America’s greatest failure.”

For transnational historians, however, the American experience of war was anything but exceptional. The years between 1840 and 1880 were, as Michael Geyer and Charles Bright have shown, a period of extraordinary international violence. They have counted 177 “war-like confrontations” during these decades. Among the most violent of these global conflicts, including Europe’s 1848 and America’s Civil War, were struggles for economic development, national unification and democratic government, a nineteenth-century ideology Enrico Dal Lago has termed “progressive nationalism.” The transnational turn in Civil War history, then, does not regard the Civil War as a unique national “failure” that could have been avoided if only cooler heads had prevailed. The concurrent rebellions occurring in China, Europe, South America, and the United States during this era were, in this view, global in their origins and consequences and must be seen as interconnected events embedded within a bloody worldwide process that existed outside the control of historical actors in any one nation.

Historians of the post-1848 transatlantic links between Europe and the United States echo an insight David M. Potter offered nearly fifty years ago. In a landmark essay published in 1968, he argued that “in both Europe and America, the forces of tradition and privilege tended to be arrayed against nationalism, while the forces of liberalism and democracy tended to support it.” Yet, as Potter noted, his insight into the connections between the political turmoil in Europe and the age of the Civil War was largely speculative. In a bibliographical discussion at the end of his article, he commented that while the number of books written on the Civil War was “enormous, the bibliography strictly applicable to this essay is composed largely of books that are yet to be written. It is in fact one point of the essay that the significance of the Civil War for world history . . . has been generally neglected by historians.” His call for a greater number of scholarly works linking America’s sectional conflict with contemporaneous political events and ideological processes abroad, especially those that began in Europe in 1848, initially gained little traction among historians. It was not until 1995 that James M. McPherson published an important essay that contextualized the Union victory in the critical momentum it gave to the worldwide struggle for representative government, a movement on the defensive following the brutal suppression of Europe’s 1848–49 democratic uprisings.
Yet, scholars remained slow in picking up Potter’s and McPherson’s challenges to the entrenched notion of the Civil War as an unique nation-bound episode detached from global events, especially Europe’s popular uprisings. U.S. historians, of course, have long recognized the significance of the year 1848. Yet the episode that has most concerned them was the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that February, ending the Mexican-American War and essentially completing the continental expansion of the American empire. In so doing, however, it ignited new controversies about the expansion of slavery in the United States that played a central role in the dissolution of the Union. The widespread consensus that events in neighboring Mexico influenced U.S. history after 1848 offers valuable interpretative insights into the continental dimensions of Civil War causation, but it fails to embed this conflict within global history in any meaningful way.

More recently, however, several historians have framed their scholarship around the transatlantic connections between Europe’s 1848–49 popular uprising and America’s Civil War era. This new scholarship does not dispute that Europe’s democratic revolutions and the crisis of Union in the United States were marked by local variations and patterns unique to each continent. Questions about the future of chattel slavery, for instance, so central to America’s sectional crisis, did not play a causal role in Europe’s uprisings. While acknowledging the continuing importance of the local, however, this scholarship also frames America’s Civil War and Europe’s 1848 in time and space as integrated theaters of war within a protracted global struggle shaped by liberal ideology and nationalist aspirations.

Bender’s magisterial conceptualization of America’s place in global history since 1492 devotes one chapter—“Freedom and the Age of Nation Making”—to the Civil War. He argues that this conflict must be framed within the “larger international liberal movement” that began with the continent’s 1848 revolutions. Andre Fleche argues that the “fight over the future of republican government in America can also be seen as a fight over the legacy of 1848 and the meaning of nationalism and revolution in the Atlantic world.” In his discussion of the impact of Europe’s popular revolts on the intensifying sectional crisis in the United States during the 1850s, Timothy Mason Roberts argues that the outbreak of the Civil War was “America’s ultimate response to the 1848 revolutions.” Mischa Honeck examines the transatlantic impact in America of the radical German-speaking immigrants—the Forty-Eighters—who fled to the United States in the wake of their failure to create a unified German nation-state governed by a constitutional monarch. Paul Quigley examines the Confederate struggle to create a nationalist discourse and argues
that this effort borrowed heavily from the events of 1848, especially the state-building projects in Germany and Italy, as well as the minority Hungarian nation’s attempts to break free from the Hapsburg Empire. For each of these historians, the American Civil War was an event that cannot be fully understood outside the transnational context established by Europe’s democratic and nationalist struggles.

The concept of democratic liberalism has become so naturalized in the United States that it often is difficult for Americans of today to remember a time when their experiment in representative government seemed to much of the world’s powerful ruling elites, including those in Europe, a dangerously radical idea. Given the bad name nationalism gained in the twentieth century, it is even more difficult to recall an era in which progressives regarded the nation-state as the most reliable guarantor of individual liberties. Yet this was the case in 1848.

At the beginning of that crucial year, virtually all of the democratic institutions that Americans, especially white Americans, took for granted did not exist in Europe. Absolute monarchs ruled the sprawling Hapsburg Empire and the powerful Prussian state. Dynastic regimes characterized by aristocratic networks of power and privilege ruled many other smaller states. Voting rights in England and France were restricted to the very wealthiest members of society. In France, for instance, property requirements were so prohibitively high that only 5 percent of the male population was enfranchised. Most Europeans lacked the basic civil liberties—freedom of the press, speech, religion, and public assembly. A conspicuous decrease in Europe’s standard of living, brought on in large part by population increases and the economic and social dislocations caused by an expanding industrial sector, further increased the discontent of an increasingly politicized European public. This combustible mix ignited in February 1848, when a wave of popular uprisings washed over the continent.

The apparent collapse of Europe’s absolutist regimes in the face of these popular demonstrations was stunning in its swiftness. King Louis-Philippe of France fled to England just days after street protestors in Paris demanded constitutional rule, expanded male suffrage, and the guarantee of basic civil rights. His abdication in late February resulted in the declaration of France’s Second Republic (France was the only nation to create a republic, a form of government far too radical for the rest of Europe, as a result of 1848). News of the events in Paris traveled fast, aided by the newly invented telegraph. Demands for greater suffrage, the expansion of liberal government and the guarantee of civil liberties characterized all of the continent’s political protests. But in other important respects the
revolutions throughout central and eastern Europe took on particularistic characteristics that reflected a complex array of local grievances. The demonstrations spreading east into the Hapsburg Empire—a gigantic entity that ruled eleven different nations, including the increasingly restive peoples of Italy and Hungary—and the fragmented states of the German Confederation were marked by popular demands for national self-determination and the establishment of constitutional monarchies. In March, Prince von Metternich, a key symbol of Europe’s absolutist regimes, fled Vienna for England. In Berlin, King William IV called for the election of a constituent assembly and signaled his support for the creation of a unified German nation-state that included Prussia. For a brief moment in the spring of 1848 it looked as if the supremacy of Europe’s autocratic Old Order had been shattered and a new era dominated by the political ideals of liberal nationalism had risen in its place.

Roberts’s book offers the most detailed discussion of the reaction to 1848 in the United States, but transnational Civil War scholars agree that at first, American public opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of events in Europe. Most Americans found nothing particularly radical about the political demands of the European protestors or their desire for national self-determination. Americans in both the North and South maintained that events in the Old World demonstrated the global potency of the democratic institutions that grew out of the American Revolution of 1776. As Roberts demonstrates, however, beginning with the “June Days” in Paris and continuing into the summer and fall of 1848, the class-based radicalism and growing violence on the continent soured the American public on Europe’s popular uprisings. Americans began questioning Europe’s ability to emulate the successful example their own nation’s revolutionary past offered.

Within months of the first wave of uprisings, European revolutionaries had split into liberal and radical camps and began fighting among themselves. By autumn of 1848, as it became clear that the repressive apparatus of the Old Order remained intact, the continent’s absolutist regimes began mounting a counterrevolution. The Hapsburg army regained control of Vienna and crushed the army of the Piedmont republic, a hotbed of Italian nationalist aspirations. The Austrian and Russian armies combined to overthrow the liberal government established in Hungary and bring the country back under Hapsburg control. William IV, refusing the offer to become monarch of a unified Germany, ordered fifty thousand troops to forcibly adjourn the Prussian national assembly in Berlin. A new spasm of revolutionary activity broke out in 1849, especially in Italy and southern Germany, but the autocratic Old Order ultimately reestablished its control.
over the entire continent. The symbolic end of the 1848 period came in France in December 1851, when Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, nephew and heir of Napoleon, staged a coup d’état and soon after declared himself Emperor Napoleon III.

Historians of first-wave feminism were among the earliest scholars to demonstrate the direct connections between Europe’s 1848 revolutions and events in the United States. The timing of the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention—and its famous “Declaration of Sentiments” demanding equal rights for women, including suffrage—in July 1848 was not a coincidence. Bonnie Anderson showed that as early as the 1830s an international network of female activists joined together to fight for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights for women. Given their longstanding ties with European feminists and antislavery activists, Anderson argued, the Seneca Falls organizers were directly inspired by news of the continent’s popular demonstrations. Lucretia Mott, whose visit to the Seneca Indians of upstate New York helped instigate the Seneca Falls Convention, was moved by 1848. Mott wrote soon after the convention that she felt inspired by the Seneca ability to learn “from the political agitations abroad . . . and [who] are imitating the movements of France and all Europe in seeking a larger liberty—more independence.”

Nancy Hewitt argues that female activists in the United States “followed events in Europe closely throughout [1848],” and grieved the rapid defeat of the Continent’s revolutionary movements. “As conditions deteriorated in Europe and as slaveholders continued to expand their political reach at home,” she concludes, “the revolutionary dreams of 1848 faded, but the sense of international connections did not.” For many American feminists, disappointment in the failure of Europe’s revolutions resulted in a renewed sense of commitment to the transnational abolitionist movement.

Scholars of first-wave feminism, then, have convincingly linked Europe’s revolutions on the timing of the Seneca Falls Convention, as well as the longer-lasting influence of the continent’s liberal revolts on the intensified growth of the abolitionist wing of the international women’s rights movement. In Europe, beleaguered feminists took heart from events in America. From a jail cell in Paris, Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin, two radical French feminists imprisoned after the repressive return of Bonapartism, wrote in 1851 to a convention of American women’s rights advocates, “Your courageous declaration of Woman’s Rights has resounded even to our prison, and has filled our souls with inexpressible joy.” Feminist scholars’ accounts of the influence of 1848 on the international development of first-wave feminism offer a valuable model of the transnational impact of the Old World’s upheavals on the era of America’s Civil War.
Recent work has forged direct connections between constructions of nationalism in 1848 and in the breakaway region of the U.S. South. Viewing the perennial question of Confederate nationality within a transnational framework, Quigley and Fleche argue that Confederate leaders utilized the rhetoric of national self-determination that characterized the European revolutions in eastern and southern Europe to justify southern secession from the United States. Confederates argued to the world that much like the Hungarian and Italian nationalists who fought to break free of the rule of the Hapsburg monarchy in 1848, southern whites were a distinct national minority oppressed by a hostile and increasingly foreign northern majority. As such, this line of argument continued, the South deserved to be a separate nation ruled by its own chosen leaders. When the Russian army invaded Poland in 1863, Confederate leaders pointed out the close alliance between Moscow and Washington and, desperate for international support, compared Lincoln’s war on the insurgent South to the globally unpopular Tsarist suppression of Polish independence.19

As Quigley and Fleche point out, international opinion never recognized rebellious white southerners as a distinct ethnic community within the United States. In addition, the white supremacist philosophy that served as the foundation of southern nationalism was based on the continuation, and perhaps even the territorial expansion, of chattel slavery, an increasingly contested form of labor and racial subordination by the 1860s. In sum, the South’s attempted self-identification with the place-based nationalist struggles of Europe’s captive peoples failed to garner the Confederacy either the global legitimacy it craved or the international support crucial to its ability to survive as an independent nation.

By viewing Confederate nationalism within a North Atlantic context, Quigley and Fleche have deepened our understanding of this important subject. Their transatlantic focus, however, begs an important question: in what ways did the Confederacy’s support of the French intervention into Mexico undermine its claims to be the inheritor of the nationalist ideals of 1848? After Richmond embraced Napoleon III’s attempt to impose a European monarch, Maximilian of Austria, on the people of Mexico, Latin American governments found the Confederacy’s attempt to identify its insurgency with nationalist struggles in Europe deeply hypocritical. The Confederacy’s support of Napoleon III was all the more remarkable given that the autocratic French emperor quite literally embodied the European counterrevolution against the liberal nationalist ideals of Europe’s 1848 popular uprisings.

Much to the bitter disappointment of the South, Richmond’s active collaboration with Napoleon’s III’s antidemocratic “Grand Design” in
Mexico did not result in the French recognition of the Confederacy. It did, however, expose the South’s complete indifference to the fight for progressive nationalism in other nations. For Civil War historians, the Confederacy’s betrayal of the ideals of 1848 in the Western Hemisphere offers a new dimension to examine the global failure of Confederate nationalism and, in addition, exposes intriguing issues worth exploring concerning the slaveholding South’s allegiance to the worldwide progress of republican government.

Expanding the territorial framing of the Civil War to include the Western Hemisphere would add interpretative power to one of the major contributions of the new generation of transnational historians of America’s sectional crisis. These scholars have recovered the contemporary belief, widely shared by the proponents of democracy, that the counterrevolutionary wave that had defeated the continent’s liberal revolts had raced across the Atlantic and aligned with the slave South to threaten the existence of republican government in the New World. Roberts, for instance, focuses on the links between 1848 and the U.S. sectional crisis of the 1850s. He argues that the autocratic reaction against liberal nationalism in Europe initially reinforced notions of American exceptionalism. The counterrevolutions in Europe made Americans all the more proud of the success of 1776. They also believed that, unlike the class turmoil that undermined the uprisings in Europe, their democratic revolution had resulted in the creation of a uniquely peaceful, prosperous, and stable nation-state. For northerners determined to halt the expansion of slavery, Roberts suggests, this self-satisfied resurgence of American exceptionalism ended abruptly in 1854 after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The tactics of Missouri’s proslavery border ruffians, who crossed into Kansas to vote in territorial elections, made a mockery of the democratic process. Viewed through the lens of the recent antidemocratic repression of the continent’s democratic uprising, the fraudulent territorial elections in Kansas and subsequent bloodshed between pro- and antislavery forces in Kansas convinced many in the North that “European-style violence” had entered into the United States.

Thoughtful critics of Roberts’s work have argued that the evidence necessary to “sustain [his] weighty argument that antislavery politicians . . . had the 1848 revolutions in mind when they looked at events unfolding in Kansas [is] a little thin.” If Roberts is correct, future work should be able to create narratives that thicken our understanding of the ways the transnational interplay between European and American political history shaped and heightened the growing sectional tensions between North and South in the decade leading up to secession. Northerners, for instance, often decried slaveowners’ “aristocratic” concentrations of wealth and
political clout. Antislavery forces believed this small group of influential Americans constituted the powerful Slave Power Conspiracy whose control of Washington threatened the future of American democracy.

In his famous 1856 speech, “The Crime against Kansas,” Charles Sumner decried the existence of a “Slave Oligarchy which now controls the Republic.”23 In his October 1858 Rochester, New York, speech, William Seward argued that in the “states where the slave system prevails, the masters, directly or indirectly, secure all political power, and constitute a ruling aristocracy.” Seward warned the South, “No aristocracy of any kind, much less an aristocracy of slaveholders, shall ever make the laws of the land in which I shall be content to live.”24 It is at least plausible to suggest that the description of the slaveholding landed gentry of the South as “aristocrats” and “oligarchs” might have gained a more ominous resonance for many Americans after the success of Europe’s autocratic landholding elites in suppressing the continent’s liberal revolutions. Historical research that further examines Roberts’s suggestion that Bleeding Kansas, the rise of the Republican Party, and the development of its political philosophy were all linked to Europe’s 1848 period has the potential to create a new understanding of the place of the American Civil War within the wider post-1848 global struggle for liberal nationalism.

The works of Fleche and Honeck demonstrate that radical German exiles were among the most important antislavery northerners articulating the connections between Europe’s aristocratic Old Order and landholding elites of the slave South.25 Although fewer than ten thousand German radicals fled to the United States after the defeat of their attempt to create a unified Germany governed by constitutional monarchy, these well-educated, energetic, and politically active exiles quickly gained a public voice that belied their numbers. For the Forty-Eighters who had fled to the United States in the wake of the failure to establish a unified and constitutionally governed Germany, the links between Europe’s counterrevolutions and America’s sectional crisis were clear.

Meeting in 1854, a convention of German radicals issued the Louisville Platform, demanding the end of slavery and equal rights for African Americans. “Opposition to the politics of slavery,” the exiled journalist Karl Heinzen argued, “is the battle against reaction in Europe.”26 After the onset of civil war in the United States, influential Forty-Eighters such as Carl Schurz and Franz Siegel explicitly linked the secessionist movement, led by wealthy southern landholders, with the counterrevolutions that had crushed their own attempt to create a united German republic.

After Fort Sumter, German-speaking unionists were among the earliest white Americans to agitate for immediate emancipation. A number of
German-speaking immigrants settled in the American Midwest, especially St. Louis and Cincinnati. It was no accident, as Fleche notes, that John C. Frémont’s August 1861 order freeing slaves in Missouri was issued in St. Louis. Frémont’s headquarters was filled with radicalized European freedom fighters, many of them German, who pushed for immediate emancipation because they sensed in the Civil War that Europe’s counterrevolutionary reaction had materialized on U.S. soil. Fleche’s contextualization of Frémont’s famous order within the international struggle for liberal nationalism invites other historians to explore whether transatlantic radicals played an underappreciated role in accelerating the momentum of the wartime push for emancipation in influential Union states, especially in St. Louis and the other German-speaking enclaves of the Midwest. Historians, for instance, might investigate whether the Forty-Eighters’ argument against southern secession radiated outward from their immigrant enclaves into the nationalist ideology of the North.

Civil War historians, in short, have only begun to recognize the transnational importance of the German immigrant community on the history of the Civil War. Around two hundred thousand Germans fought in the Union army. Yet, as Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich note in the introduction to their edited volume of German letters back home to Europe, the “ethnic component of the Civil War has largely faded from public memory, and it has been seriously neglected by scholars as well.” Based on their study of these letters, Kamphoefner and Helbich suggest that the “republican and egalitarian ideology manifest in the 1848 Revolution extended farther down the social scale than previous scholars have realized.”

As I discovered in my research on the interconnections between the Civil War and the French intervention in Mexico, a familiarity with the ideas of German-speaking freedom fighters was not required for those who came to view the 1860s as a decade of global counterrevolution. Napoleon III’s early 1862 decision to order the French army into Mexico with the intention of crowning Maximilian of Austria as emperor was a graphic demonstration to many in the Union that the reaction against 1848 had not been contained to Europe but had instead spread to North America. In December 1863, Matías Romero, the brilliant Mexican ambassador to the United States, organized a dinner in support of the Mexican republic at Manhattan’s Delmonico’s restaurant for a group including both prominent Democrats and Republicans. Hiram Barney, an influential New York Republican serving as collector of New York City’s Custom House, declared the “sympathies of our people are in favor of the Mexican nation . . . instead of Europe being able to establish monarchies in this
continent, she may see, in a short time, some of the monarchies of the Old World turned into republics.” Scholarship that increases the understanding of the ways the North’s nationalist ideology was shaped by the belief that the French intervention in Mexico marked an expansion into the New World of the European counterrevolution against republican institutions and the democratic revolts of 1848 promises to shed important new light on the transnational nature of America’s Civil War.

Thomas Bender, one of the leading voices calling for a transnational turn in American history, reminds us that taking a “global perspective is not to ignore or banish distinctive national histories. Rather, it is to recognize each nation as a province, a singular case of a larger history.” One of the greatest practitioners of global history, C. A. Bayly, goes farther, suggesting that for the people living through the nationalist upheavals of the nineteenth century, “localism remains formative.” Historical actors, he maintains, retained the ability to shape global processes to fit their local needs and conditions. “As a history of experience,” the global violence that accompanied the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century consisted of “a patchwork of disconnected movements, special histories that should not be wrenched too casually into common patterns.” Historians must “examine the moral and material connections” between the local and transnational, Bayly concludes, and “these emerge strongly when a global perspective is adopted.” A more acute understanding of the intersections between the local and global during the Civil War offers historians of this era the potential to gain greater insight into a period of American history that remains perhaps the most formative of our collective past.

NOTES

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15. Ibid., 377–421.


25. For an important earlier discussion of this issue, see Bruce Levine, The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

26. Honeck, We Are the Revolutionists, 7.

27. Fleche, Revolution of 1861, 60–64. For a discussion of Cincinnati, see Honeck, We Are the Revolutionists, chap. 3.


29. See Kelly, “North American Crisis of the 1860s.”

