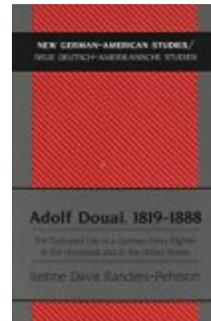




Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson. *Adolf Douai, 1819-1888: The Turbulent Life of a German Forty-Eighter in the Homeland and in the United States*. New German American Studies; Neue Deutsch-Amerikanische Studien. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. 364 pp. \$67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-4881-7.

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A Restless Spirit of the Revolution

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Adolf Douai is best remembered in America—if at all—for being hounded out of Texas in 1856 because of his abolitionist writings. He is also remembered as a leading American socialist who in 1883 delivered the eulogy to Karl Marx to a packed crowd at Cooper Union Hall. This biography joins the ranks of several others on second-echelon German-American political and intellectual figures such as Frederick Hecker and Francis Hoffmann that have recently appeared [1]. Randers-Pehrson presents Douai as somewhat of an ideal type of the German revolutionary, someone whose career offers “an examination of the German revolution in miniature ‘A’ from the inside out” (p. 6). She recently completed a book-length treatment of the 1848 Revolution in Germany, and this “life-and-times” approach to Douai overlaps considerably, and occasionally literally, with her previous work.[2]. The biography treats all major developments of the Revolution, including the parliamentary efforts in the Paulskirche and the 1849 uprising in Baden and the Palatinate that did not involve Douai at all, so that there are sections such as Chapter 7 where Douai is mentioned only once rather tangentially in the first paragraph. Consequently, more pages are devoted to Douai’s first 33 years spent in Germany than to the last 36 he spent in the United States.

Douai left behind an unpublished autobiography that the author uses as a basis for her work, but she does not accept it uncritically. For example, Douai described him-

self as “a true child of the proletariat” (6), but the author points out that while he lost his mother early and may have experienced some economic want, several generations of his family had belonged to the educated bourgeoisie. Douai himself studied at the University of Jena, partially supported by stipends, and went on to acquire a doctorate at Königsberg, if only to measure up to the standards of his future in-laws, who were minor nobility and members of the Prussian officer corps. The author’s characterization of Douai as a typical Forty-Eighter gains credence from his experiences in the Vormärz. One of the many underemployed intelligentsia, he spent four years in the Russian Baltic serving as a tutor on a nobleman’s estate. And his homeland, the dwarf principality of Saxe-Altenburg where he returned in 1846, embodied many of the ills of German Kleinstaaterei.

The outbreak of revolution in 1848 found Douai teaching at a progressive private school which he had founded and actively involved in the establishment of rationalist Freie Gemeinden; he soon found himself elected to the local Landtag. In July he authored a Volkskatechismus that included a freethinking parody on the Lord’s Prayer—one of a number of factors leading to his arrest in October 1848 and his sentencing to eight months of imprisonment. Although Douai struggled to maintain his pedagogical enterprises in the face of reaction, continued official harassment, including a second imprisonment for two months, led him to emigrate in March 1852 to the United States, where his father and a younger brother

had preceded him. After a brief interlude in the immigrant colony of New Braunfels, Douai established himself in San Antonio and began editing a German-language newspaper. This brought him into contact with Frederick Law Olmstead and brought about his brief appearance in the national spotlight with the abolitionist controversy that drove him from Texas.

With Olmstead paving the way, Douai next located in Boston, supporting himself by a variety of activities including the establishment of a kindergarten. Although he is sometimes credited with the introduction of the Froebel system to America, the author makes clear that Douai had only limited experience as an educator at this point, none of it involving young children or exposure to Froebel's methods. Douai's school lasted only a year in Boston before his atheistic pronouncements undercut his support. Landing on his feet in New York, he served a brief term as editor of the *New Yorker Demokrat*, and then served as director of the bilingual Hoboken Academy during most of the Civil War. The next five years were spent in New York, fraught with difficulties in attempting to run a school and edit a newspaper. In 1871 Douai moved to Newark to take over directorship of another bilingual German-American school, and with \$1,200 of his wife's inheritance, purchased a comfortable home and had apparently achieved a measure of economic security. But after four successful years, he resigned his position in a dispute with the school board and ended up losing his house to foreclosure. The last ten years of his life from 1878 on were spent as an editor of the Socialist *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, from which position he delivered the eulogy to Marx.

Instead of a resume, the author devotes a concluding chapter to the relationship between Douai and Karl Heinzen—two uncompromising radical freethinkers who

held similar ideological beliefs and yet ended up in a bitter feud that lasted from 1859 to the end of their lives, exploring the question of what it was in the experiences or psychological makeup of German radicals that, despite their devotion to the “stern god of civil courage,” made them so rigid and often self-defeating.

The author is clear about her likes and dislikes, and on which figures she considers to be realistic or unrealistic in their strategies and assessments. But in general the book is balanced in its judgements and informed with background information from the recent scholarship on a given issue, e.g. Jonathan Sperber on 1848, William Gienapp on American politics of the 1850s, or James McPherson on the Civil War. Errors of fact are minor, restricted to things like the assertion that Hesse-Darmstadt instead of Hesse-Kassel was annexed by Prussia in 1866 (p. 316), or that Texas Germans were “Catholics for the most part” (p. 195), though it should be noted that Heinrich Börnstein's memoirs chronicle *Fünfundszwanzig Jahre*—75, not 25 years (p. 340). But all in all, the book forms a worthwhile addition to the literature on German America, rescuing a Forty-Eighter from near obscurity and shedding some interesting light on the mentality of German revolutionaries in general.

Notes

[1]. Lore Blanke, *Franz Arnold Hoffmann (1822-1903): Politiker auf Deutschamerikanischem Kurs* (Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1993); Sabine Freitag, *Friedrich Hecker: Biographie eines Republikaners* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998).

[2]. Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson, *Germans and the Revolution of 1848-1849*. *New German American Studies; Neue Deutsch-Amerikanische Studien*, Vol. 18. New York, Berlin and Oxford: Peter Lang, 1999.

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