



The German 1848/49 Revolutionaries

and their impact on 19th Century USA

In 1776, as Thomas Paine exhorted his fellow Americans to wrest their own liberty from the British empire, he reminded them of the international significance of their cause. "Freedom hath been hunted around the globe," he noted. "Let us receive the fugitive, and prepare ... an asylum for mankind." Since then, many refugees have accepted Paine's implicit invitation. Few, however, have attracted more attention or left a deeper imprint than a levy of Germans who arrived in the United States during the era when their homeland was convulsed by the social and political crises that culminated in the failed revolutions of 1848/49.

Of course, by no means all of the more than one and half million who emigrated in that period considered themselves political refugees. But a great many, from all walks of life, were touched and influenced by the era's widespread spirit of dissent. As Friedrich Kapp put it, addressing a large immigrant audience in New York City in the 1850s, "We are all either social or political refugees. Dissatisfaction with the political or social relations of Europe led us hither... [and] we came here with a firm determination to hold on to our principles." This broad layer of immigrants provided the primary audience for the refugee intellectuals commonly thought of as the 'real' forty-eighters.

What were their principles? Broadly defined they were people of the political left. These

self-consciously political refugees and their more numerous supporters, in turn, had a still broader impact on the United States because the kinds of issues that concerned them and the various solutions they championed had a trans-Atlantic resonance. It was their discovery that the United States had not solved the problems attendant upon these powerful developments that convinced many German emigres that the causes with which they had identified in Europe retained their relevance and urgency in their adoptive homeland.

Thus, within a few years of their arrival, many forty-eighters found themselves involved in a host of controversies and movements in their adoptive homeland. And for some of them, the U.S.'s Civil War offered the chance to achieve victory in a freedom struggle that had failed in Europe.

In these ways and others, the immigrant generation of 1848 became important players in the drama of 19th-Century American life.

This collection is an invaluable aid to those wishing to study first-hand a turbulent, fascinating, and seminal chapter in USA history.

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