The years 1848–1849 have been of constant interest to historians in both Europe and the United States. In Europe, the uprisings that occurred across the continent and the reactions that set in the following year posed many questions about motivation, ideology, and historical significance. While the events across the Atlantic were of interest to many in America, they observed them against a background of unprecedented economic expansion, the opening of new areas of the West, and the gold rush in California. For many the revolutions were a distraction, but not an inspiration.

The two works reviewed here examine quite different aspects of these intertwined events.

Timothy Mason Roberts’s *Distant Revolutions* concentrates on Americans’ perception of the revolutions as they unfolded. This is expanded by a series of essays examining American observers of the revolutions in varying contexts. In very ambitious researches Roberts uncovers opinions expressed by Americans in memoirs and diaries, newspaper accounts, political speeches and later histories of the revolutions. The opposite perceptions – how some Europeans regarded the American example as a model of republicanism and nationalism –, have been dealt with elsewhere, and get little attention in Roberts’s volume.

In a very diverse and mobile America, there could hardly be said to be a consensus in the American mind on what was occurring across the Atlantic. Despite the heritage of Manifest Destiny and the stirrings of „Young America“ within the Democratic party, Americans tended to view the chaos in Europe through the lens of their own particular ideologies and political views. Roberts perhaps does not emphasize enough how Americans at the time were consumed by the conclusion of the Mexican War and its aftermath.

From optimistic beginnings arising from the hope that Europe was following in the path of the American Revolution, views began to change as events in Europe developed. The turn to radicalism in some of the revolutions alienated many in America who saw „freedom“ in the light of widening opportunities in an expanding nation, and who showed no interest in a socialist regime. As counter-revolution set in and revolutionary movements began to fail, Americans turned away from the idea that the European upheavals were following in the model of the American Revolution.

Roberts follows in considerable detail the course of revolutions in France, Austria, Hungary, and the Papal States in Italy. Relatively lesser attention is given to the uprisings in the German states. Yet those are the revolutions Americans at the time were probably most aware of, especially because of the presence of the large numbers of German immigrants who were flocking to America at the time. Roberts recounts in great detail the efforts of the Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth to solicit aid in America for a revival of the revolution in his country; however, he ultimately found little support. The German „forty-eighthers“ in America, however, were much more visible and, in the long run, obliged to give up their hopes for a united nation of German states. They had their own views of the connection between European and American revolutions, and began to spread their views through the German-language press, which they soon began to dominate. Thereby they began to broadcast their European liberal and radical views to the American public.

For all his prolific research, Roberts makes no use of the immigrant press in America, which often was focused on these events in Europe. This was also true of the Irish journalists, who had witnessed the downfall of the
abortive uprising in 1848 there. It was the im-
migrant editors who most held up the exam-
ples of the United States as an example for Eu-
ropeans – even though many of them would
become disillusioned with the actual work-
ings of American democracy, where parti-
sanship and patronage, not ideology, seemed
to form the political allegiances of so many.
Roberts makes very little use of sources in lan-
guages other than English.

Mischa Honeck’s We Are the Revolutionists
follows an entirely different direction from the
revolutions of 1848. Like Roberts’s work it is
a series of discrete essays. Honeck examines
in one way or another confrontations between
the German „Forty-eighters” and American
abolitionists. The German refugees first ar-
rived in the hope that they would soon re-
turn to Europe to renew the revolutions. That
hope soon faded, and most of them eventu-
ally turned to the American political and so-
cial issues of the time, including the increas-
ingly disruptive issue of slavery and aboli-
tionism. While radical abolitionists clamored
for an immediate end to slavery, the recent
territorial acquisitions in the West raised the
issue of „free soil” – whether slavery would
be allowed to develop in the newly-acquired
lands.

How the forty-eighters responded to these
issues is told in narratives of encounters
between specific German radicals and spe-
cific American advocates of slavery aboli-
tion. The journalist Frederick Law Olm-
sted on one of his trips through the South
found the German settlements in west Texas
and the radical forty-eighters Adolf Douai
and Friedrich Kapp. In Cincinnati, the so-
cialist editor August Willich made common
cause against slavery with the Unitarian min-
ister Moncure Daniel Conway. In Milwau-
kee, Matilda Anneke, feminist and wife of the
Prussian revolutionary Fritz Anneke, estab-
lished a close relationship with Mary Booth,
wife of an abolitionist editor. Their close re-
lationhip, however, ultimately rested upon
their common commitment to radical femi-
nism, rather than their anti-slavery views. In
Boston, Karl Heinzen, perhaps the most rad-
cal forty-eighth of them all, linked up with
the fiery and unremitting abolitionist and re-
former Wendell Phillips. Honeck’s impres-
sive research unfolds the stories of these and
others in complex detail. He also follows
the more general story of German immigrants
and abolitionism forward through the Civil
War, emancipation, and Reconstruction.

There were limits to the cooperation be-
tween these two groups of radicals. German
immigrants in general who came to oppose
slavery did so mainly from a free-soil point
of view, concerned about its expansion into
the new lands of the West. And even the
most active forty-eighters differed from the
American abolitionists over fundamental is-
sues. The radical Germans were „revolution-
ists” in their advocacy of socialism and a ne-
necessary upheaval of society, and often linked
their radicalism to atheism and anticlerical-
ism. The American abolitionists saw them-
tselves as moral reformers, rooted their oppo-
sition to slavery in religious arguments, and
joined them to other reforms, such as tem-
perance, nonviolence, and nativism, causes
which the forty-eighters abhorred.

Honeck demonstrates an admirable com-
mand of resources, both in English and in Ger-
man. But in the effort to define the overall
relationships between German radicals and
American abolitionists, we are left only with
a picture of great diversity – among aboli-
tionists generally, among the German forty-
eighters, and among the American public.
And in Roberts’s volume, we likewise see a
great variety of American responses, and not
a consistent perception of the European up-
heavals of 1848–1849. One can only conclude
that turbulent times bring forth multiple and
conflicting reactions.

James M. Bergquist über Honeck, Mischa: We
Are the Revolutionists. German-Speaking Immi-
grants and American Abolitionists after 1848.
James M. Bergquist über Mason Roberts, Ti-
mothy: Distant Revolutions. 1848 and the Chal-
lenge to American Exceptionalism. Charlottesvil-