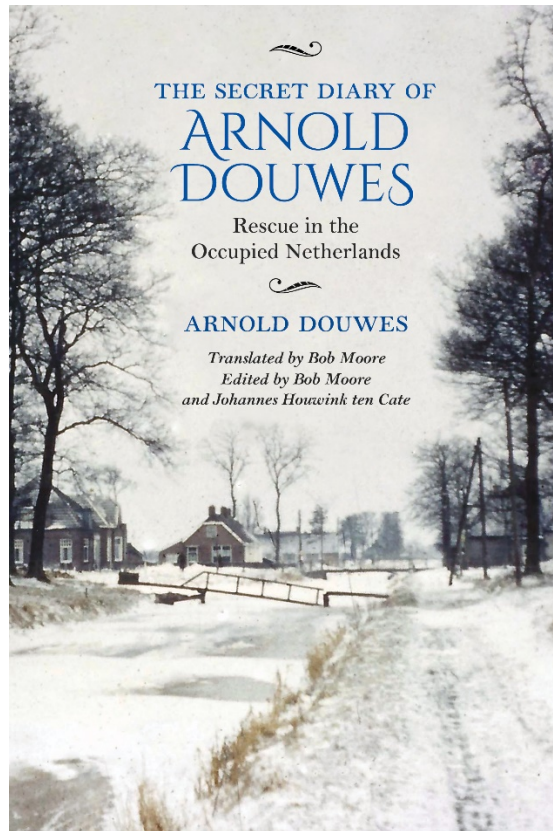


Review
Arnold Douwes:
The secret diary of Arnold Douwes:
Rescue in the occupied Netherlands
Bob Moore (trans.)
Bob Moore & Johannes Houwink ten Cate (eds.)
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 339 p.
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Reviewed by Megan Koreman



Between July 1943 and October 1944, Arnold Douwes led a network of rescuers in and around the village of Nieuwlande in Drenthe, not far from the northeastern border with Germany or the transit camp at Westerbork. During that time he slept in haystacks and holes in the ground, ate what he could scrounge and washed when he could. He also kept a diary that he buried in pieces in jam jars and retrieved after the war.

Bob Moore, a professor at the University of Sheffield and prolific writer on the Dutch resistance, has very ably translated the diary. He and Johannes Houwink ten Cate, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, have contextualized it with maps and photos. The footnotes and glossary alone give us a mini tour of the Netherlands under occupation, including the panoply of German and Dutch armed units menacing the population and the various slang terms used to identify them. The extensive introduction provides a much needed overview of the occupation of the rural Netherlands in English.

The son of a pastor, Douwes lived with an iron conviction of right and wrong that bedeviled his relationships with others but served him well during the Nazi occupation. Douwes never doubted his moral obligation to rescue the persecuted, whether they were Jews, Dutch resisters on the run, Dutchmen hiding from the forced labor draft, or escaped French or Russian POWs. He did, however, find himself unable to trust a deserter from the SS. Douwes expected the same high moral standards from all his neighbors and was not above browbeating them into doing the right thing. More than once he convinced someone to shelter a fugitive for one or two nights and then neglected to take the *onderduiker* ('person in hiding') elsewhere. This led to rather a lot of unpleasantness for Douwes personally as he fielded complaints, but he stuck to his principles.

In addition to reports on his illegal work, Douwes captures a sense of the quotidian under occupation. He describes the excavation and furnishing of hiding places in the woods as well as shortages. Being a church-going man, he also reports on noteworthy sermons and the illegal doings of the local *dominees* ('pastors'). Other resistance activity in the area, especially raids on prisons and ration card offices and the burning of collaborators' farms, get full descriptions. In 1944 Douwes adds reports of Allied aircraft overhead and any crashes in the neighborhood. After he was involved in hiding an American aviator, Douwes kept a pair of coveralls handy. Whenever he saw a parachute or plummeting airplane, Douwes got on his bicycle with the coveralls to see if he could find any aviators in need of a disguise.

Douwes also includes such homely details as birthday parties, the weather, and the progress of a scheme to bake rye bread. Children appear at several times, mostly as Douwes takes them to new hiding places on the back of his bicycle. He was particularly charmed by a five-year-old boy who kept correcting himself when

he called the Germans “*Moffen*” (translated by Moore as ‘Krauts’). Good dinners with bacon and fresh pancakes always merited note in those hungry times.

The entire neighborhood appears to have known what Douwes was doing. He did, after all, ask quite a lot of them to shelter *onderduikers* or to donate to the cause. He loathed asking for money and was much happier selling postcards made by an artistic fugitive living under the floorboards. In the late summer of 1944, they could barely keep up with the demand for their postcards of Queen Wilhelmina. Neighbors regularly stopped Douwes on his bicycle to warn him about check points or raids ahead. Indeed, he felt comfortable enough to file a complaint with the local police regarding the theft of blankets and such from his hiding place in the woods. It turned out that the policeman himself had found them, figured they belonged to Douwes and his colleagues, and took them for safekeeping. But not everyone approved of his rescue work. He received threatening letters telling him to stop bringing danger into the community, apparently from neighbors who were not collaborators but who were not willing to resist.

Douwes prepared his diary for publication twice during his lifetime, both in the Netherlands and in Israel, but without seeing it reach print. At least part of the reason has to be that this is an honest book. Scribbling on scraps in the thick of the war, Douwes understandably spent more ink on venting his frustration at uncooperative *onderduikers* than on the pleasant ones who did all they could to help their hosts and themselves. A handful of Jewish *onderduikers* come up again and again because they alienated yet another host by demanding tea at exactly 3:05, or by sending letters revealing their hosts’ address, or, most outrageously, by consorting with “Krauts.” Such people endangered not only themselves but the entire network of people who would have been safe if they had not opened their homes to strangers. They also caused a great deal of trouble for Douwes, who bitterly regretted the loss of every hiding place. They were always hard to find and increasingly in demand.

Douwes applied the same candor to his gentile neighbors. There were those who did what Douwes needed by opening their homes or sharing their goods. But there were also those who did not. In Douwes’ opinion the majority of the Dutch failed to do their duty through cowardice and moral slackness. He mentions more than once that a *Radio Oranje* broadcast from London sickened him with its lies when it spoke of the “heroic” attitude of the Dutch population. From Douwes’ perspective, there was a distinct lack of self-sacrifice or heroism among the Dutch.

Resisters in the Dutch-Paris network who rescued Jews and others in Belgium and France also had trouble finding hiding places for fugitives and also had to repair the damage done by fugitives who acted selfishly and without any sense of the risks that strangers were taking on their behalf. Douwes was undoubtedly accurate in his portrayal of the shortcomings of some people. But at

the time that he tried to publish his diary, such observations did not meld with the official stories of the war. Jewish survivors, for example, would have found the behavior of the few difficult *onderduikers* to be painfully similar to Nazi stereotypes. Furthermore, the myths of national resistance that legitimized postwar governments did not leave room for unflattering accounts of a population afraid to resist. Douwes chronicles the courage and resourcefulness of an extensive network of men and women, but his complaints give the impression of a country of bystanders. That image clashed with the official Dutch story of a nation divided between “*goed*” and “*fout*” (‘patriotic’ and ‘treasonous’, referring to one’s attitude during the occupation).

The publication of Douwes’ diary in 2019 indicates a welcome turn to a more nuanced attitude toward civilian life during the war. The immediate benefit is to demonstrate just how terribly difficult the occupation was for Dutch civilians and to make that history available to readers of English. From the time the diary begins in July 1943, the Germans and their collaborators rampage through Douwes’ corner of Drenthe. There are raids, shootings, reprisals and thefts of the sort that are commonly thought to have happened only in eastern Europe. Nowhere in France did the population suffer from this much deprivation and fear in 1943, and very few places in France suffered the sort of terror that the Germans and their collaborators inflicted on the civilian population in Drenthe during and immediately after the failed Allied Operation Market Garden centered on Arnhem. The reader is spared the horrors of the last six months of the occupation of the Netherlands above the rivers only because Douwes was arrested in October 1944, before the famine.

The secret diary of Arnold Douwes provides a rare portrait of what it meant to resist day in and day out and is as close to a record of the psychology of a resister as one can get. It is an important addition to the few books about the Netherlands during the war available in English. Despite Douwes’ grouching, the remarkable community of rescuers in and around Nieuwlande deserves to be recognized alongside the handful of other resistance communities such as Chambon-sur-Lignon in France.

About the reviewer

Dr. Megan Koreman has taught European history at Texas Tech University (Lubbock, Texas, U.S.) and the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.). She has published two histories of civilians during the Second World War: *The expectation of justice: France 1944-1946* (Duke University Press, 1999) and *The escape line: How the ordinary heroes of Dutch-Paris resisted the Nazi occupation of Western Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2018). *The escape line* appeared in

Dutch as *Gewone helden: de Dutch-Paris ontsnappingslijn* (Boom, 2016). She keeps a blog about resistance at www.dutchparisblog.com.

