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Mathematicians at war power struggles in Nazi Germany's mathematical community: Gustav Doetsch and Wilhelm Süss. (English) [Zbl 0959.01025](#)

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This paper makes extensive use of the fragmentary papers of Gustav Doetsch in the author's possession (but to be transferred to the university archives at Freiburg), and of the only recently available papers of the Deutsche Mathematiker Vereinigung as well as those of Wilhelm Süss. As a consequence, he provides much new information about both men; the one, the official leader of the mathematical community from 1937 to 1945, the other an important (if perpetually irascible) mathematical figure who ran the gamut from liberal Catholic to "110% Nazi" (Heinrich Behnke's phrase). Because of the new information it provides this is an important paper. In particular, it provides valuable information about the early days of *Compositio Mathematica* and the early friendship of Doetsch and Süss.

However, the paper suffers from a somewhat one-sided perspective. Both Süss and Doetsch were extremely complicated men, and working primarily from the papers mentioned above these complications are smoothed over in what seems a not completely accurate way. In particular, Süss seems to be treated somewhat too harshly, and Doetsch somewhat too gently. There is no question that Süss benefited from his position under the Nazis; there is also no question that this position helped him do the many "good deeds" (Professor Remmert's phrase) with which Süss was credited after the war. There is no question that Doetsch was a Nazi activist both as a volunteer member of the military, and as someone involved in denunciations. A review is not the place to engage in debate about such matters – especially since all such evidence is necessarily equivocal. It simply seems to this reviewer that the author has neglected exculpatory material concerning Süss and condemnatory material concerning Doetsch – it is freely admitted that careful consideration of such would have enormously lengthened this paper, and Professor Remmert is certainly correct in wishing to stress the importance of his new material, but he seems to have produced a somewhat one-sided picture. For example, Prof. Remmert's section on "exchanging gifts" is accurate enough, and Süss certainly wanted to "gain and return access to the corridors of power and influence", but under the circumstances, that seems to have been called for.

A few corrections of fact: Charles (Karl) Pisot was an Alsatian who went over to the Germans. Süss tried to obtain German citizenship for him, an effort which (fortunately for Pisot) was in vain. I do not know what the situation in Greifswald was in 1928, but Winfried Scharlau et al say that there was no regular 'Habilitation' procedure there in mathematics, only 'Umhabilitationen'. It would seem that Süss used the 36 papers he had written while in Japan to serve as a 'Habilitation'; also it would seem that Süss came to Greifswald at the suggestion of Karl Reinhardt who was both a childhood friend and another Bieberbach student. H. Kneser and Süss did form a close friendship, and Kneser may have been formally the supervisor of the 'Habilitation', but his role was purely formal.

On the conflict with Doetsch over the "Rasch initiative", the Prandtl 'Nachlass' should be consulted: it gives a somewhat differently nuanced view, and also indicates that Doetsch's true interests may not have been as "applied" as Prof. Remmert seems to think.

Conrad Müller, while he wished to resign as Secretary of the DMV, remained a member of its governing council. It would be of interest to know when Doetsch and Süss fell out of friendship. Prof. Remmert says they were friendly up until 1937, but material in the Kneser 'Nachlass' would seem to indicate that the falling-out may have had something to do with the denunciation of Ernst Zermelo in 1935 for failing to give the "Hitler-salute" on January 15 (return of the Saar). The denunciator was Eugen Schlotter, at the time Doetsch's 'Assistent'. Of course, this was at the time of the crisis in the DMV (Bieberbach's ultimatum to the society was on January 19, 1935), and Süss and Doetsch had been friendly supporters of Bieberbach the previous September. However, the Zermelo affair dragged on until mid-March. In any case, the Kneser 'Nachlass' also contains some indication that already in January 1935 Süss was uncertain about Doetsch as a collaborator, and by 1936 was uncomfortable with Bieberbach.

I applaud Prof. Remmert's wanting "to shift the emphasis away from judgments of guilt and innocence towards a historiography more concerned with understanding and explanation". This has also to be applied

to individuals with a consideration of what they sought to achieve and for what purposes. Neither Süss nor Doetsch were innocents. Süss profited from his personality and was able to use his position to benefit German mathematics and often German mathematicians during the Nazi period. This is not to deny that he also profited personally and materially. Doetsch was defeated by his personality which seems to have been highly irascible and focussed on personal self-aggrandizement. To what extent after, say 1936, either man dissembled his true feelings about the regime will probably always remain unclear.

None of the above denies the importance of Prof. Remmert's paper, especially its Sections 3 and 7, nor that of the new materials he is able to bring to bear to give us new aspects of the complicated story of mathematicians in the Third Reich.

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