

“They Are What They Are Dragooned to Be:”  
German-Americans, German Idealism, and the First World War

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In the years leading up to and during the First World War the question of how German Idealism influenced the actions and behavior of Germans in Europe was much discussed. In the USA this discussion of Germans had great bearing on the lives of German-Americans. To what extent were they loyal Americans, to what extent still German sympathizers or helpers? Suspicions led to disgraceful treatment of these mostly first and second-generation immigrants, but the notion that they too were seduced by the idea of a superior German *Kultur* and that this might be dangerous was not without ground. Many books and pamphlets were dedicated to the German question in the years 1915-1916, among those books by John Dewey (*German Philosophy and Politics*) and George Santayana (*Egotism in German Philosophy*). Dewey's and Santayana's interventions discredited German ideas that started the “present war.” These ideas, in a philosophically much impoverished guise, would start a future one. These two American philosophers helped give currency to competing ideas—freedom and democracy; rationality and the pursuit of happiness—that have been holding sway in large parts of the world since the Second World War. They're starting to look somewhat shopworn to an increasing number of people; they have lost too much of their depth over time. Reading Dewey and Santayana, a century after they wrote, restores both freshness and depth to ideas that have saved and enhanced countless lives by civilizing the world.