

**Peter Hoeres.** *Krieg der Philosophen: Die deutsche und britische Philosophie im Ersten Weltkrieg.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2004. 646 S. EUR 78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-506-71731-3.



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**Published on** H-German (January, 2006)

The First World War has often been understood as a clash of civilizations—as the first round in a struggle for life and death between two philosophical and ideological systems. The goal for British soldiers in Flanders fields was thus not just to shoot the enemy. It was also to save the world from a philosophical system that supposedly embraced bellicosity and nihilism. British wartime propaganda, both academic and popular, claimed that this ideology was best epitomized by three German thinkers: Friedrich Nietzsche, the hypernationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke, and General Friedrich von Bernhardi. The claim was that general's allegedly extremely popular and social Darwinist *Germany and the Next War* (1912) had brought Treitschke and Nietzsche's philosophy up to date for the generation of Germans who manned the trenches during the war.

Scores of historians have understood this wartime struggle between Western civilization and German *Kultur* as the coming of age of a German *Sonderweg* that started in the Enlightenment and would ultimately lead to the killing fields of

the Holocaust. It is thus surprising that, despite detailed studies about the ideological warriors among historians, political scientists, and economists, our knowledge of British and German wartime philosophy remained piecemeal. Peter Hoeres's fair-minded, magnificent *Krieg der Philosophen* has closed this gap in our knowledge.

During the First World War, some British academics expressed their hope that gone would be the days of Germanic monumental tomes of scholarship full of footnotes and annotations. Hoeres's 646-page study containing 2545 footnotes has proved them wrong. And this is only the abridged version of his Münster Ph.D. thesis (written under the supervision of Hans-Ulrich Thamer). Yet patient readers will be rewarded with a great piece of scholarship; others will, for years to come, find in the book an indispensable encyclopedia or handbook of British and German wartime philosophy. Indeed three quarters of the book contain summaries of seemingly almost every wartime book, pamphlet, article, and utterance of both mainstream and renegade German and British philosophers.

Hoeres's main thesis is that a comparison of British and German wartime philosophy does not support the view of a German *Sonderweg*. What unites German and British wartime philosophy was an attempt to address the social and political challenges of modernity. German philosophers might have believed that they stood worlds apart from Western philosophy. Yet, Hoeres argues, maybe too eagerly, that their belief was basically wrong. And so was that of British philosophers who focused on Nietzsche, Treitschke, and Bernhardi and vulgarized versions of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel to claim a fundamental difference between German and British wartime philosophy.

Hoeres admits that many German philosophers until the end of the war and beyond hung onto the mythical "Ideas of 1914," namely, the belief in German national unity and solidarity and specifically German values, as opposed to Western capitalism and selfishness. Still, by the end of the war, the majority of philosophers in both countries believed in the idea of a League of Nations and international cooperation. Even before, the wishy-washy "Ideas of 1914" had been a smoke-screen for the heterogeneity of German philosophy. Furthermore, German philosophers generally were operating in defensive mode. Western observers certainly perceived that German philosophers constantly took the initiative in actively and aggressively making the case for the House of Hohenzollern. In fact, more often than not, so the book argues, German philosophers acted in defense against attacks leveled on them. Their over-the-top rhetoric often compensated for deep-seated insecurity.

Both German and British philosophers believed that their side had a universal mission and duty to fight the war. The difference, however, as Hoeres claims, was that German philosophers sought to employ German national ideas universally, while British philosophers thought to uphold universal values. The missionary zeal of German philosophers was, according to Hoeres, thus

more "nationalized." This claim is true, but it only tells half the story. The universal ideals British philosophers were trying to uphold were in truth the fruits of more than three hundred years of Anglobalization. In other words, when British philosophers defended "universal" values they, in fact, had British values in mind. The real difference then between British and German philosophers is that the former wanted to keep the status quo, while the latter wanted to change it.

Hoeres convincingly shows the heterogeneity of both British and German philosophy, suggesting that philosophers in both countries asked roughly the same kinds of questions, and that many of their recipes for solving the world's problems were similar, such as the foundation of a League of Nations (even though Hoeres allows that German philosophers were more likely to support war). The danger, though, of Hoeres's argument is that it insufficiently asks what exactly these recipes were. Hoeres is wholly convincing in arguing that the ways British and German philosophers put together the ingredients of their recipes were very similar. Still, he sometimes runs the risk of accepting too readily that the ingredients, the values that went into the dish, were the same, too. For example, as Hoeres himself shows in the descriptive parts of the book, what British and German philosophers meant when they advocated for a League of Nations was often quite different. Did as many German philosophers keep parliamentary democracy, capitalism, liberalism, and individualism stocked in their intellectual pantries as did British philosophers as the war progressed and radicalized?

The real challenge in making sense of British and German wartime philosophy lies in quantifying the voices Hoeres records. It is one thing, and a very important thing at that, to show that one can find views for and against anything on both sides. It is quite another thing, though, to argue that on balance there is little difference between British and German philosophers, unless one can

demonstrate that the views held by philosophers were distributed among similar lines in both the British and German cases.

It is quite possible that a careful consideration of how these voices were distributed in both countries will confirm Hoeres's thesis that, even as the war radicalized, no *Sonderweg* existed for German philosophers. Even then we should ask ourselves what differences which philosophers made in their countries. Peter Hoeres's method of assessing the influence of wartime philosophy is primarily to look at philosophers in politics, such as Richard Haldane. Important though this approach is, it will not answer the question of how the majority of British and German philosophers were perceived and received in their societies. How much did they shape public opinion and policymakers? How were they shaped by external influences? Were the hypernationalist voices among philosophers as central or as marginalized in both countries? What difference did philosophy make to the war? Did philosophers provide the intellectual fuel that kept the war machine going? Were differences in pre-war philosophy indeed instrumental in bringing about the war? The Oxford don of Anglo-German parentage, F. C. S. Scott, thought not. In 1916, he pointed out that Balliol, the most prominent cradle of British politicians and statesmen, was also the epicenter of the impact of German idealism on British public life: "The large and influential section of our rulers which was educated at Balliol by T. H. Green and his followers has been for years indoctrinating us with this same theory [that of German philosophy] without any terrible effects. So may not the verdict of history be that philosophic ideas had as little to do with it as with other wars?" (p. 190).

One of the highlights of Hoeres's book is his discussion of the struggle within British philosophy between German-influenced British idealists and liberal empiricists standing in a homegrown tradition. To explain the war, both traditions applied the view of the two Germanies--one belli-

cose, Prussian, and militarist that was responsible for the war, and the other good, peaceful, and held hostage by the former. However, they also applied the view of the two Germanies in their civil war against each other. Idealists used it in self-defense by arguing that idealism was part of the good Germany, while the bad Germany had been infused with materialism. Empiricists, meanwhile, used the image of the two Germanies to snipe at British idealists: Idealism, they claimed, was the source of all that was evil in Germany. As the London sociologist and philosopher Leonard Hobhouse put it, "German thinkers eagerly adopted the theory of the omnipotence of the State, and the so-called idealists who have followed them in England have been ready to take up any stick with which they could beat liberalism and political Rationalism" (p. 170). Indeed, the doyen of British idealists at the time, Bernard Bosanquet, was soon dubbed a "Prusso-phile philosopher" (p. 349).

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising, then, that according to common wisdom the war struck a fatal blow at British idealism. Hoeres's book, in contrast, argues that British idealism never was totally extinguished. This is certainly a point well worth making. Yet the more important point here remains unanswered: Was the war coincidental to the retreat of idealism and the ultimate triumph of empiricism, utilitarianism, and analytical philosophy? Or was, by 1914, the race between idealism and empiricism to determine the future of British philosophy still open-ended? In that case, the war would have made all the difference for the direction of philosophy in the twentieth century.

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**Citation:** Thomas Weber. Review of Hoeres, Peter. *Krieg der Philosophen: Die deutsche und britische Philosophie im Ersten Weltkrieg*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

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