CHAPTER 3

“I Want Citizens’ Clothes”: Irish and German-Americans Respond to War, 1914–1917

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For too long, scholars of American immigrant communities have reduced the responses of German and Irish-Americans to those of the extremes. In the case of Germany, scholars have relied far too much on the unrepresentative writings of George Sylvester Viereck’s *Fatherland*, a newspaper funded by the German government and one that grew increasingly disconnected from reality as the United States approached entry into the Great War. In the Irish case, scholars have for too long taken Republican newspapers like the Clan na Gael’s daily as representing all of Irish-American opinion.

To be sure, some members of the German and Irish-American communities were attracted to the ideas of the Clan na Gael and Sylvester Viereck, but we should be wary of assuming that the most extreme positions were representative of majority opinion. As always, it is difficult to assess with any certainty the numbers of people who read any given newspaper or believed any given ideology, but the evidence strongly suggests that a wide variety of opinion existed inside both communities. The communities themselves, moreover, were divided by issues of class, region of origin, and political allegiance.

This paper will analyze the responses of the Irish and German-American communities to the events of 1914–1917. The two groups shared much in common. By 1914 both had completed a largely successful process of assimilation into mainstream American society; no contrast any longer existed between a “German” or “Irish” identity and an American one. Members of both groups, moreover, understood that the assimilation process had resulted in real, tangible gains that made them as “American” as any group; at a time when a genuinely American outlook on the world was forming, the members of these two groups had a strong and important voice to contribute.

They were, however, both out of step with their fellow Americans on one crucial topic in 1914. Both groups generally responded to the outbreak of war in

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1 One book guilty of this overreliance on Viereck is Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less than War: A New History of America’s Entry into World War I* (Lexington, 2011).

2 These newspapers, as well as Viereck’s *Fatherland*, can be seen at: <http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:145635>.
Europe with anti-English feelings that their fellow Americans did not share. German-Americans tended to blame the outbreak of the war on either British envy of German success or Russian avarice for land in Poland and the Balkans. The Danzig-born Harvard University Professor Hugo Münsterberg crystalized these arguments in a series of public speeches, newspaper articles, and finally a book entitled *The War and America*, published at the end of 1914. Münsterberg blamed Russia, Britain, and France who together “begrudged this prosperity of the Fatherland which had been weak and poor” but had risen to great power status. In this conceptualization, Russia, a nation of “half-civilized Tartars,” had tricked Germany’s erstwhile friends into an alliance against her.3

Münsterberg remained an eloquent advocate for Germany until he went into a self-imposed silence after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May, 1915. The sinking may either have convinced him that his initial defense of Germany’s actions had been misplaced or he may have been responding to the intense backlash he received from the Harvard University community and the people of Boston. Harvard’s president publicly defended Münsterberg’s right to free speech and rejected out of hand a sizeable financial offer from a wealthy alumnus if Harvard fired him, but privately President A. Lawrence Lowell warned Münsterberg to avoid making public speeches on the war and to keep discussions of the war out of his classroom. By then Münsterberg had stopped coming to Harvard social functions and faculty meetings because his defense of Germany had become too unpopular.4

Americans often dismissed Münsterberg, a German born in Germany, but Germans born in the United States shared some of his suspicions, at least in the war’s early years. Edward A. Rumely, the German-American publisher of the New York *Evening Mail*, argued before the *Lusitania* sinking that British money and media influence had distorted American foreign policy. Like most German-Americans, he remained suspicious of English motives, as did the former Secretary of Commerce and Labor, the German-American politician Charles Nagel. Both men’s close friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, and their support for Roosevelt in the 1916 presidential election season, showed that German-American identity need not conflict with a close association with someone as pro-British and anti-German as Roosevelt. For Rumely and Nagel, the key remained ensuring that American entry into war served American interests only. In 1915 and 1916, they opposed war because of their belief that

4 A. Lawrence Lowell to H. Münsterberg, 25 Sept. 1914, Boston Public Library MSS ACC 2499b (304a) and Lowell to Münsterberg, 6 May 1915, 2499b (304e). Münsterberg died while delivering a lecture at Harvard in Dec. 1916.