

# The First World War

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## Anti-German Sentiment in Popular British Discourse during World War I



Figure 1: David Wilson, *Red Cross or Iron Cross*, (London: Dangerfield Printing Co., 1917).

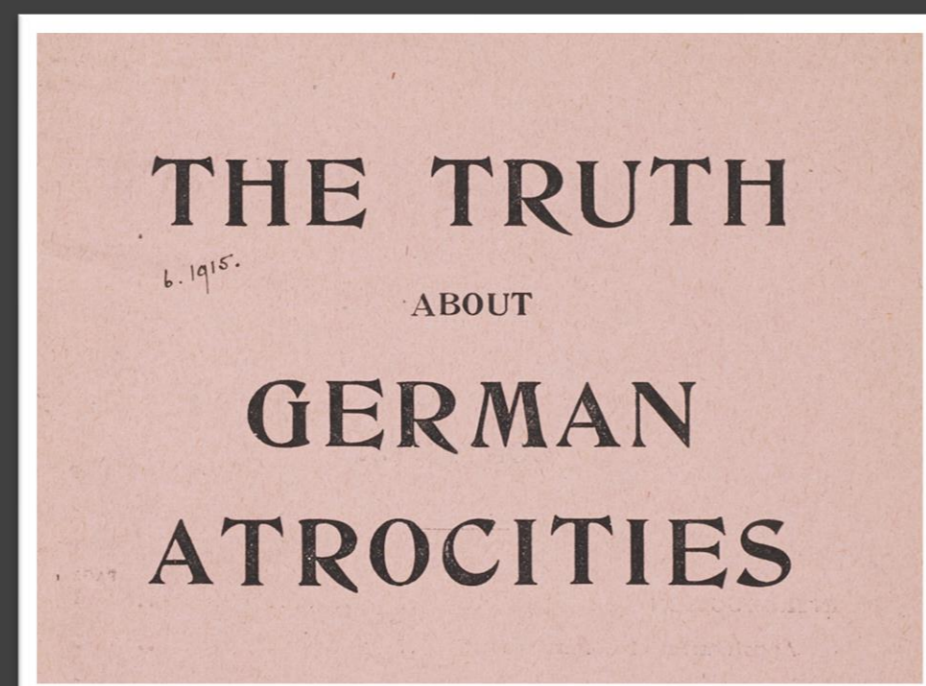


Figure 2: Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library, Liddle Collection, War Pamphlets 1914/18/TRU.

References:  
Alzada Comstock, 'War's Effects on Britain's Empire' *Current History*, 12 (1942), 438-442.  
T Williams, Tom, 'Meeting the Enemy: British German-Encounters in the Occupied Rhineland after the First World War' *Open Edition Journals*, 10, (2020), 776-790, p. 776.

Inevitably, anti-German bias intensified in the years that coincided with the outbreak of war between Britain and Germany in 1914. This is evident from 'visions of a brutal, arrogant warmongering Hun' that became popularised in the run up to the First World War. A particularly useful propaganda tool became reportage covering the treatment of the British in German prisoner of war camps, one of the most famous of which was Ruhleben. British publications regarding life in Ruhleben became mobilised as a propaganda tool to encourage popular anti-German sentiment, emphasising the German mistreatment of British citizens, such as describing 'men torn from their families reft of their livelihood, and tormented by gnawing anxiety about the future struggle for which physical privation and mental depression are rendering them [...] unfit'. The semantic field of torture in 'torn', 'reft', 'tormented', 'gnawing', 'privation' and 'depression' demonstrates how publications describing the poor conditions at Ruhleben were intended to portray the German authorities as inhumane and underhand in their dealings with British civilians. This is furthered by direct attacks on the German character, as German staff such as Dr Geigner, the Medical Officer, were described as 'utterly unsympathetic' and 'cruelly cynical' whilst 'a prisoner had to feel pretty bad before he sought his advice'. The adjectives 'unsympathetic' and 'cynical' strip Dr Geigner of his humanity as he is portrayed as sadistic and heartless in his treatment of his patients, conveying how British reportage covering life at Ruhleben was used to construct the image of what Tom Williams describes as the 'imagined German enemy'; a caricature of Germanness that was used to defame German identity through its alignment of German identity with an inhuman, barbarous 'Other'.

Ruhleben Documents Taken from:  
Special Collections, Leeds University Library, University of Leeds Archive Collection, LUA/PHC/003/5.

## German at Leeds during World War I

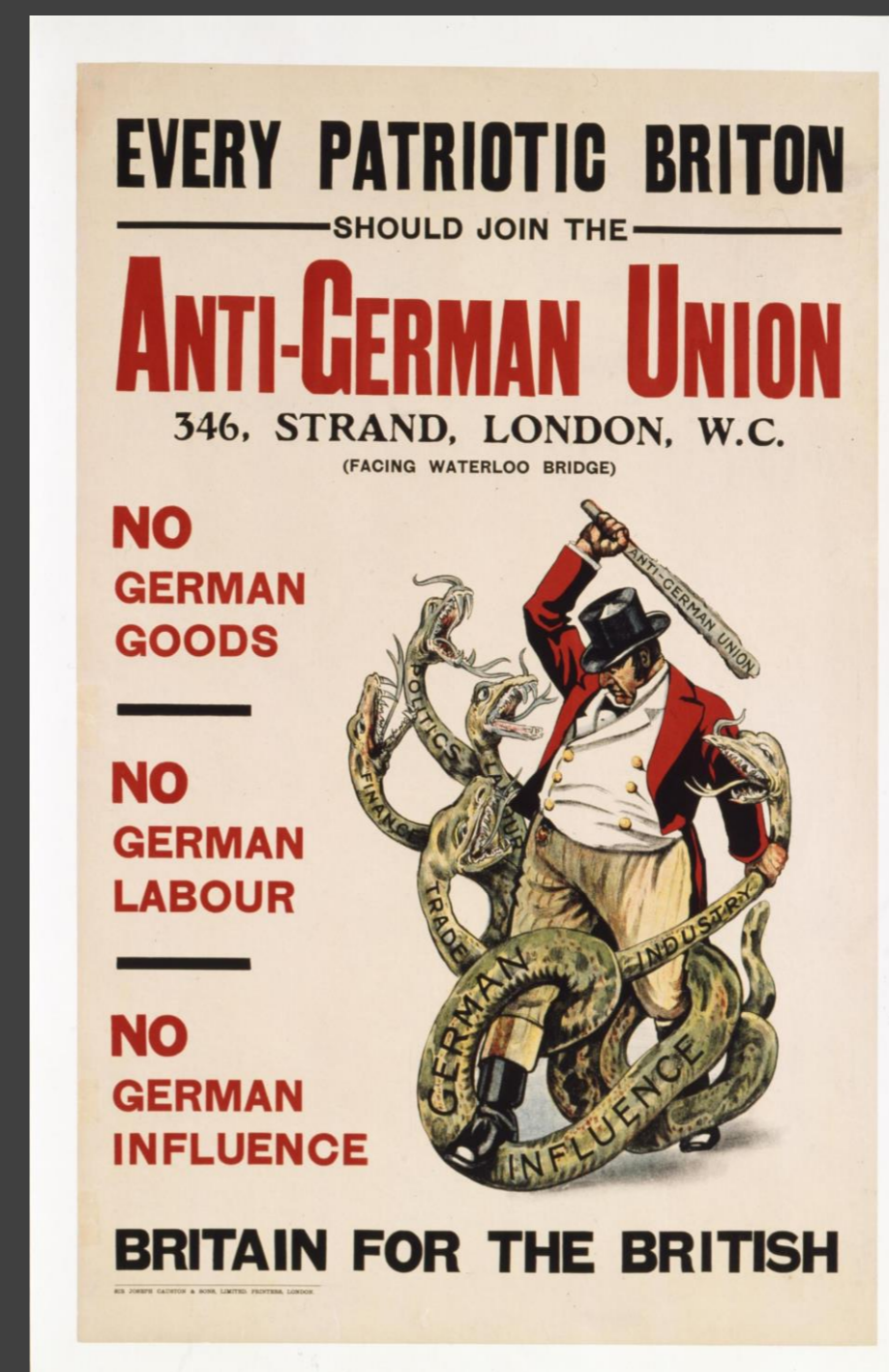


Figure 3: Anti-German Union, *Britain for the British* (London: Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, 1914)



Figure 4: David Wilson, *Once a German Always a German! Remember*, (Finsbury: Globe Printing Co., 1918)

Nevertheless, it was not until 1919 and thus the end of the First World War that the curriculum itself at Leeds is dramatically shaken by anti-German prejudice. As W.H.D Rouse suggests, within the post-war period, the discussion of German culture was considered 'unwholesome' due to having 'low ideals'. This is evident in dramatic shifts to the content of exam papers within the field of German Studies post-1919. Preceding the war, the content of exam papers was exceedingly traditional, primarily focussing on canonical works of Romantic German literature, with the June 1903 exam series requiring students to 'characterise the form and style of Schillers early dramas' in addition to providing a 'brief sketch of Goethe's and Schiller's friendship, and of their joint literary activity.' However, there is a seismic shift in the content of exam papers in 1919 following the conclusion of the war, as is evidenced by the gutting of German literary content from all assessment. Within papers 10-1 of the June 1919 series, there is a decisive avoidance of canonical German literature, and, indeed, German literature in general, as the works of Schiller and Goethe are replaced by the ancient classical texts of Homer. This emphasis on ancient Greek classical works continues throughout later papers in the 1919 series, which include texts regarding the history of the Helots in Sparta and discussion of the Greek Gods such as Apollo, which students were expected to translate into German. This affirms Strong's understanding that in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, German was still considered 'the language of the enemy', leading to the dramatic side-lining of German literature from academic discourse, which became increasingly visible within the pedagogy and curricula of British universities.

Figure 5 (below): Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library, University of Leeds Archive Collection, LUA/PHC/003/5.

## Conclusion: How did anti-German sentiment in popular discourse during World War I affect German Studies at Leeds?

On the other hand, it would be misleading to suggest that the decision to replace German literature with ancient Greek and classical epic literature at the University of Leeds within the immediate aftermath of war was random, as the choice of classical Greek texts had its own political motivations. Alzada Comstock argues that epic narratives of voyage, battle and heroism revive the age-old narrative of 'the empire on which the sun never sets', evoking the memory of British imperial glory. In this way, the choice of Greek epic literature to replace the German Romantic literature of Schiller and Goethe, reflects how the celebration of foreign literatures is decisively substituted with narratives that subtly reference Britain's colonial prowess, stressing the centrality of Britain on the global stage.

