

The Second World War

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Anti-German Sentiment in Popular British Discourse during World War II



Figure 1: Special Collections, Leeds University Library, Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW2/GA/PRB/3.

Elazar Barkan acknowledges how British self-recognition requires this degradation of other cultures, affirming the seemingly paradoxical imperialist belief that 'by not being Others we define ourselves'. This rhetoric is clearly recognisable in the public speeches of the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, during the Second World War. This is particularly striking in an early speech at Downing Street on April 9th 1942, in which Churchill described 'our unrelenting struggle against the vile, dark, criminal forces which have laid their foul grip on Western Europe and on Christian civilisation'. The juxtaposition of the 'vile', 'dark', 'criminal' and 'foul' with the image of humanity and morality in 'Christian civilisation' demonstrates the contrast between the heroism of Britain and the barbarity of the 'savagely' German nation; evoking the vocabulary of colonial exploit through establishing a distinction between the enlightened coloniser and the 'primitive' colonised subjects. In this way, the supposedly 'alien' quality of Germanness is emphasised whilst equally stressing the status of Britain as the heroic 'saviour' of mankind. The striking parallels between Churchill's rhetoric and the ideology reflected in key shifts to the pedagogy and curriculum of German Studies at the University of Leeds demonstrates how the re-entry of xenophobic values into British discourse was actively shaping the dissemination and representation of German language teaching in 1930s and 1940s Britain.

References:
Elazar Barkan, 'Post-Anti-Colonial Histories; Representing the Other in Imperial Britain' *Journal of British Studies*, 2, (1994), 180-203, p. 180.

German Studies at Leeds during World War II



Figure 2: Special Collections, Leeds University Library, Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW2/GA/PRB/4.



Figure 3: The National Archives, Kew Central Office of Information, Posters Collection, INF 3/140.

Changes to the Curriculum

Following the outbreak of WW2, the number of students studying German Studies at the University of Leeds decreased suddenly. The outbreak of war coincided with the introduction of alternative schemes to the curriculum. The number of Old High German texts were reduced to 13 in 1935 from a total of 18 in 1920, demonstrating a more contemporary focus within the study of German texts at the University. This was followed by major changes to the curriculum, namely the complete removal of all Old High German texts from the literature section of the course, Scheme A.

Motivations for Changes

It is thought that these sections were removed due to their focus on the Germanic roots shared by both English and German, thus demonstrating a decisive need to separate British and German culture for the purposes of maintaining the Self-Other distinction that was essential to the revival of imperialist ideology during wartime. On the other hand, Old High German texts were maintained in the secondary section of the course for the purposes of maintaining the quality of the language side of the course, however, emphasis on their cultural value was significantly reduced.

References: Special Collections, Leeds University Library, University of Leeds Archive Collection, LUA/DEP/016.

Conclusions

It is clear that the anti-German sentiment circulating within British media and popular British discourse throughout World War Two had a significant impact on the representation of German language and culture within German Studies at the University of Leeds. Moreover, the violence of the language in political speeches and British publications during this time contributed to the spread of xenophobic attitudes towards Germanness. It is shocking to see how stark the influence of this prejudice is on the curriculum during the 1930s through to the mid-1940s at Leeds, in which Old High German Texts, previously central texts within the syllabus, were removed due to desiring to avoid lectures regarding the connections between Old English and German and thus the ties between British and German culture. As a result, we can see how the syllabus at Leeds was manipulated to distance the influence of German identity and language on British culture, as a means of othering 'the enemy'.



Figure 4: Photograph from the University Archive of the University of Leeds depicting the forefront of Parkinson Building. Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library, University of Leeds Archive Collection, LUA/PHC/003/5.