

The First World War

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



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

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.

Anti German Sentiment in the British Media

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.

'The imagined German enemy'

Ruhleben and the Defamation of German identity

A particularly useful propaganda tool became reportage covering the treatment of the British in German prisoner of war camps, such as Ruhleben. These publications led to direct attacks on the German character, as German staff were described as 'utterly unsympathetic' and 'cruelly cynical', conveying how British reportage was used to construct the image of what Tom Williams describes as the 'imagined German enemy'; a caricature of Germanness that was used align 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

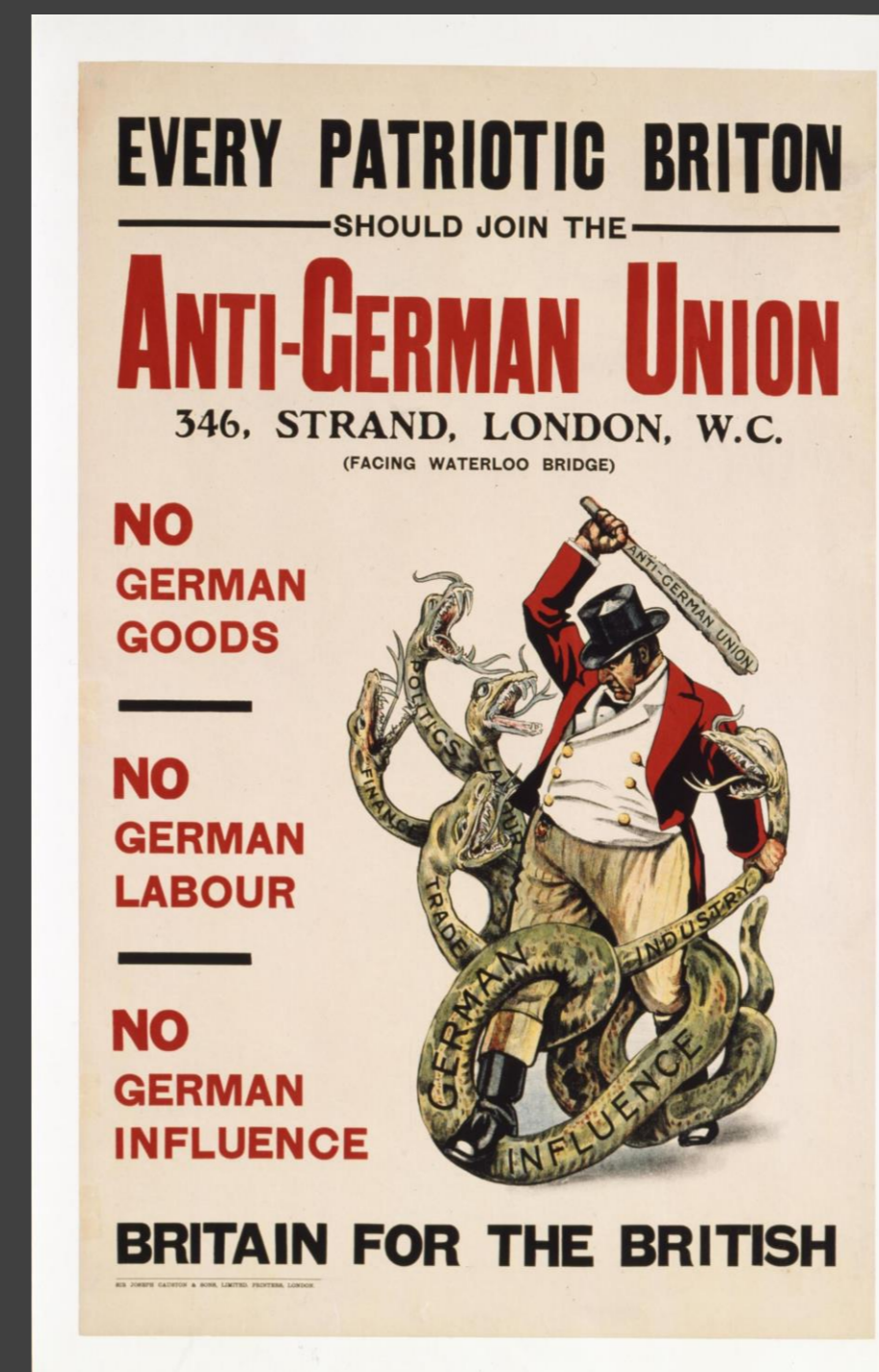


Figure 3: Anti-German Union, *Britain for the British* (London: Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, 1914)



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

Attitudes towards German Language Learning

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'.

Key Changes to the Curriculum at Leeds

Preceding the war, the content of exam papers was traditional, primarily focusing on canonical works of Romantic German literature, with the June 1903 exam series requiring students to 'characterize the form and style of Schiller's early dramas'.

However, post 1919, there were dramatic changes to the curriculum, including:

- The removal of all German literature including the canonical works of Schiller and Goethe
- Emphasis on ancient Greek classical works, which students were expected to translate into German.
- German was portrayed as 'the language of the enemy'

Conclusion: How did anti-German sentiment in popular discourse during World War I affect

German Studies at Leeds?

The decision to replace German literature with classical epic literature had its own political motivations. Alzada Comstock argues that epic narratives of voyage, battle and heroism revived 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 German Romantic literature, reflects how the celebration of foreign literatures was decisively substituted with narratives that subtly referenced Britain's colonial prowess, stressing the centrality of Britain on the global stage.



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