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0521027284 - German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914-1918

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Introduction

We need look no further, for anti-Semitism betrays an inner weakness in the internal dynamics of a nation, just like that unjustifiable and aggressive imperialism which recently led Germany into such a disastrous war. Even before 1914 England was hated by many Germans, exactly in the same way as the Jews are hated today, for they too are believed to have denied Germany its rightful place in the sun.¹

The novelist and social critic Heinrich Mann, who wrote these words in Paris in June 1933, was to pay a heavy price for his opposition to the Nazis and his alleged 'defeatist' attitude during the First World War. In May 1933 his books, and those of many other left-wing German writers, were publicly burnt in a carefully stage-managed protest on the *Opernplatz* in Berlin. This was an act of symbolic revenge by a regime which claimed to speak for the 'front generation' and which was expressly dedicated to reviving the lost 'spirit of 1914' among the population at large. A few weeks earlier, in February 1933, Mann had been the first prominent writer to flee Germany in the aftermath of Hitler's rise to power. He was also among the first to be formally debarred from German citizenship in August 1933.² Like his younger brother, Thomas Mann, he was forced to live the rest of his life as an exile and refugee, eventually leaving Europe for the United States where he died in Santa Monica, California, in 1950. In a very real sense he was a victim of the kinds of militarism and nationalist hatreds he had spent his whole life trying to oppose, albeit one who was fortunate enough to have got out before it was too late.

Like many other bourgeois anti-fascists, Mann was a Marxist sympathiser who had called for a united front of the German left in 1933 and believed that only fundamental changes in the relations of production – the abolition of private property – could bring an end to war and violence in society. For this reason too he was an early (although somewhat critical) supporter of the German Democratic Republic and its efforts to create a new and better Germany based on anti-fascist and anti-imperialist principles.³ That experiment is now over, and today, after the

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collapse of communism and the end of the cold war, Europe is faced with new challenges in the never-ending quest for peace and security.

Mann's views are also interesting in another respect, however, for they offer a critical insight into an important, if often overlooked, aspect of modern German history, namely the problem of the growth of anti-English feeling among the educated middle classes and its close connection with the emerging ideologies of imperialism and anti-Semitism. Anti-English sentiments had already been evident, for instance, in the writings of the nationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke in the 1880s and became more intense as a result of imperial conflicts in South Africa and elsewhere at the turn of the century.⁴ But, as Mann tries to convince us, the social construction of *Englandhass* had far deeper causes than the Boer war itself, causes that were more closely related to established social structures and cultural norms than to the literary outpourings of a handful of pro-Boer idealists. And this, too, is the real meaning of his devastating critique of the militarism of the Wilhelmine period and of the 'ordinariness' of National Socialism. As a result of the First World War, hatred for the enemy – whether internal or external – had become so ingrained in middle-class German society that it was almost taken for granted as part of everyday life. Or, as Mann himself wrote in a continuation of the above-mentioned essay:

After the lost war the Germans at first had no opportunity to practise their false feelings of superiority against foreign powers. They had to seek the object of their revenge at home, and found the Jews, who allegedly did not belong [in Germany] and could not be assimilated . . . But this had nothing at all to do with the truth, rather it was an excuse to get rid of their guilty consciences and also a means of undertaking domestic annexations, the only ones which could now be carried out.⁵

This study too is interested in exploring the underlying continuities in German history between 1914 and 1933. Its main aim is to rethink the impact of the First World War on the course of German nationalism and on the subsequent politics of the Weimar and Nazi eras, with particular reference to anti-English attitudes in the period 1914–18. In so doing it also raises the important question of whether it is still appropriate to talk of 'peculiarities' or 'separate pathways' in German history, leading ultimately to the racist and genocidal policies of the Third Reich.⁶ Before we can proceed further, however, it is first necessary to take a closer look at the broader historical and historiographical framework surrounding this issue. This in turn should provide us with an understanding of the context in which previous debates on Germany's role in the First World War have taken place.

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1914 and 1933 in German historiography

In the historiography of twentieth-century Europe the question of Anglo-German relations has naturally and quite correctly assumed a position of great importance.⁷ This was the case even before the publication in 1961 of Fritz Fischer's groundbreaking study of German war aims during the First World War; and since then the task of identifying the root causes of Germany's alienation from Britain (and vice versa) has continued unabated.⁸ The formal and theoretical aspects of *Englandhass*, for instance, have been closely analysed by experts on the cultural and intellectual history of the war. But hitherto its place in the politics and diplomacy of the period has received surprisingly little attention.⁹ Rather, the debate has centred on different ideological interpretations of the imperial period *before 1914*, ranging from the Marxist-Leninist emphasis on the role of monopoly capitalism;¹⁰ via the western critique of the survival of pre-industrial, neo-feudal traditions and structures in Wilhelmine society;¹¹ to the alternative, neo-Marxist position that actually stresses the bourgeois nature of late nineteenth-century Germany and its similarities with Victorian and Edwardian Britain.¹² Historians of international relations, by contrast, have usually rejected theory in favour of asking more obvious questions: 'What went wrong in Anglo-German relations?' and 'When exactly did it go wrong?'. Or, in other words, why did Britain and Germany, two countries with fundamentally compatible foreign policy interests and no direct conflicts over territories or borders, find themselves on opposing sides in 1914? And why – if we are to look at similar studies of the inter-war period – did they fail to resolve their differences in time to prevent the even greater tragedy of the Second World War in 1939?¹³

The most comprehensive account to date is Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (1980), which has had a substantial impact on all subsequent studies of German (and English) imperialism in the half century before the First World War. It therefore deserves closer analysis, as a result of the depth and breadth of its approach and because of its broader methodological implications for all scholars working in the same area.¹⁴

As far as the present study is concerned, Kennedy's work is significant in two major respects. Firstly, it has helped to break down the artificial and increasingly outdated distinction between domestic and external motives in determining the foreign policy decisions of the major imperial powers. Rather, a wide variety of strategic, diplomatic, economic and cultural factors were at play, each helping to promote the Anglo-German antagonism into a genuine clash of opposing interests. This is perhaps obvious, but nonetheless worth stating in view of recent attempts by revisionist historians to downplay the role of the German

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challenge to British naval supremacy as one of the fundamental causes of the First World War.¹⁵

Secondly, Kennedy's work has much to say about the relationship between national phobias and imperialism at the turn of the century and in the run-up to war. In particular, he shows how aggressive anti-British and anti-German stereotypes were able to migrate from one crisis period to the next, without losing any of their intensity during intervening periods of relative calm. This can be seen, for instance, at the time of the Jameson raid in 1895, or later, during the Second Moroccan crisis of 1911.¹⁶ It can also be seen in the failure of the all-important Haldane mission in February 1912 and the subsequent reactions on both sides of the Channel.¹⁷ The main deficiency in Kennedy's study, however, is the absence of a serious consideration of the historical development of German attitudes towards England *after* the outbreak of war in 1914 and *before* its end in 1918. This in turn creates a significant gap in our understanding of the relationship between the aggressive anti-English policies of the Wilhelmine period and those of the Nazi era. The present study will aim to fill this gap.

The first chapter will look at the remarkable upsurge of a violent anglophobia in German society in the first weeks and months of the war, paying particular attention to the role played by the press, the military and censorship authorities, and propagandists of various political persuasions. In order to provide an element of contrast, aspects of German attitudes towards its other main enemies, Russia and France, will also be touched upon. The key question to be asked, however, is why England, which before 1914 had been one of several potential enemies, suddenly moved to being seen as Germany's enemy number one (the *Hauptfeind*), and why its defeat and overthrow became the most longed-for outcome of the conflict. The answer, so it seems, is that the language of anglophobia fitted in most easily with the official interpretation of the war's origins, which was used to disguise and deny Germany's own responsibility for the outbreak of armed conflict in July 1914. Britain's failure to restrain its allies, it was now argued, was not just a 'mistake' or the result of errors in diplomacy, but a deliberate act of betrayal designed to unleash a world war with the ultimate aim of destroying its most feared commercial rival.

Having established that anglophobia provided a dominant part of the initial public discourse on the meaning of the war, the second chapter will go on to explore how leading German intellectuals were able to incorporate their own critique of English society and English ideals into the so-called 'cultural war', which was to be waged alongside the 'military war' at the front. Four main 'types' of argumentation against England and its involvement in the war will be analysed: the racist, the geo-political, the economic and the cultural arguments, all of

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which served as an intellectual or political basis for anti-English views. The economic motivation for anglophobia seems to me to be particularly interesting, not only because it ties in with the immediate resentments caused by the Allied blockade of Germany, but also because it helps to reveal more general anti-capitalist undercurrents in the thinking of the German right. This can be seen most famously, of course, in Werner Sombart's book *Händler und Helden*, first published in 1915, which identified the German war effort as a battle against the English 'commercial spirit'.¹⁸ By contrast, the more extreme versions of the racist critique of England – such as the alleged identity of interest between Anglo-American foreign policy and Jewish world finance – assumed a much greater importance only during the latter part of the war and in the immediate post-war era.¹⁹

Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the core part of the book, explore the impact of anglophobia on German domestic politics, in particular the brutal and bitter controversies which raged over such issues as German war aims and submarine warfare. Especially relevant here is the attempt by the extreme right, including those circles around the ousted Naval Secretary Alfred von Tirpitz, to use anglophobia as an ideological weapon in the propaganda battle for control over the home front.²⁰ Their main target was the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, who throughout the war was accused of harbouring secret pro-English tendencies which threatened the attainment of a German victory. Eventually, in September 1916, elements of the anti-Bethmann *fronde* came together to form a Committee for the Rapid Overthrow of England, which was the forerunner to the German Fatherland Party founded a year later. The story of the rise and fall of the *Volksausschuß für die rasche Niederkämpfung Englands* is an extremely important aspect of the political atmosphere in Germany (and especially Munich) during the war, and is told here in depth for the first time.²¹

Another important aspect of the impact of anglophobia on German domestic politics in the year 1916 is the growing evidence of a link between anti-English propaganda on the one hand and revival of anti-Semitic feelings on the other. It is very significant, for instance, that the high point of agitation in favour of unrestricted submarine warfare against Britain also coincided with the high point of agitation against Jewish 'war profiteers' and 'shirkers', as witnessed by the notorious 'Jew count' ordered by the Prussian Ministry of War in October 1916.²² But in the area of symbolic meaning, too, the war was increasingly seen as being a battle against the 'enemy within', against the agents of foreign (English, French or American) political ideas and traditions which were allegedly damaging to German national identity. Berlin, as the centre of a vibrant pre-war cosmopolitan spirit and as the home to a large number of Jewish-owned newspapers, was often a target of such nationalist

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suspicions. It is also here, in the right-wing agitation of 1916, that we can see the origins of the post-war stab-in-the-back myth which played such an important role in undermining the legitimacy of the new republican regime in the 1920s.²³

Chapter 6 goes on to explore some of the new themes which emerged in German anglophobia during the last year and a half of the war, from April 1917 to November 1918. This period is significant for two reasons: firstly because for many right-wing Germans the entry of the United States into the war tended to confirm existing fears of an Anglo-Saxon capitalist world conspiracy to destroy the German empire and overthrow its dynasty, and secondly because mounting internal tensions also reinforced the notion that Germany was fighting the war on two separate fronts, both abroad and at home. The comments of the Kaiser are particularly interesting here, for he now shared the view that England, although a monarchy itself, was at the head of a coalition determined to overthrow the Christian monarchical principle in Europe and replace it with the rule of Satan and an atheistic Mammonism. In this way he was able to anticipate much of the conspiracist thinking which characterised German anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism at the end of the war and in the early years of the Weimar Republic.²⁴

Another important theme which emerged in the final phase of the war was the link between anti-English rhetoric and shifting definitions of the role that propaganda itself was to play in modern warfare. This in turn was a result of the growing power of the military authorities in Germany to intervene in civilian affairs and even to redefine the very notion of 'citizenship' itself. It was also a reflection of Ludendorff's adherence to the idea that victory would come only through the collective will of the nation, defined in practical terms as the spiritual and moral mobilisation of all manpower resources deemed necessary by him to defeat the enemy.²⁵ In reality, though, it had to be admitted by the summer of 1918 that the German propaganda effort had failed and, perhaps more importantly, that England had won the 'battle for minds' as well as the battle at the front. The lessons to be learnt from this were later channelled into a complex discourse on propaganda and public opinion in the 1920s which has been recently unravelled by the historian Jeffrey Verhey.²⁶ They were also experiences which Adolf Hitler was to take to heart when he made his own assessment of the causes of Germany's defeat in his famous autobiography, *Mein Kampf*.²⁷

Finally, at the end of the book, a short epilogue discusses the more general impact of the First World War on German politics after 1918, and in particular its relationship to the rise and fall of the Third Reich. It should be said here that the aim is not a full-scale study of Nazi ideology itself, but rather to look at the way in which hatred of England came to form a significant part of the National Socialist agenda in Europe,

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especially from the late 1930s onwards. The fact that Hitler personally had favoured an alliance with Britain does not make him an outside party to all this. Rather, such collaboration was demanded primarily on the assumption made in *Mein Kampf* that England was still a world power of enormous strengths and resources, and that it could do much damage to Germany's prospects of victory in the inevitable wars of the future. Indeed, as one prominent historian has noted, once it had become clear to Hitler that the British government could not be won over to an Anglo-German alliance, Britain moved again from being one of several potential enemies to being regarded as the chief opponent of Germany's expansionist ambitions on the continent.²⁸ This held true particularly after the failure of Hitler's final attempts to woo Britain in the summer of 1940, and continued in spite of the launching of the Nazis' war-cum-crusade against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' a year later, since the final overthrow of England (and with it world Jewry) was now seen as a necessary precondition for the permanent acquisition of *Lebensraum* in the east.²⁹

It would be wrong, of course, to claim that all that went wrong in Germany after 1933 can be traced back to the years 1914–18, at least not without severe qualification and differentiation. Anti-Semitism, for instance, had a number of different manifestations in Germany, of which hostility towards England and English 'commercialism' was only one, albeit an important one.³⁰ Likewise, German imperialism before 1914 was subject to a diverse range of pressures and influences, including the anti-French stance of Rhineland industrialists such as Gustav Krupp von Bohlen and August Thyssen and the anti-Polish stance of land-hungry German aristocrats living in the border regions of East and West Prussia.³¹ Anglophobia existed alongside these other, more traditional forms of national animus and overlapped with them on a great many issues; but it also developed an important set of assumptions of its own about the true meaning and significance of German national identity and Germany's mission in the world. The key point here is to place such views within their broader political and cultural context and to identify their importance in relation to the totality of German war aims in the First World War.

Some notice, too, must be taken of the boundaries of this book. The evidence offered here is by and large confined to organised politics and the economic and intellectual elites, that is to those individuals and groups who have left a substantial trail of sources regarding their views of England. At the level of historical record, such a focus is necessary in order to identify those aspects of German Anglophobia that had a decisive impact on the political decision-making process of the period under review. It also enables us to locate the hard core of anti-English feeling which continued regardless of changes in Germany's military fortunes

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and which intensified once the goal of a separate peace with Russia had been realised in 1918. Even within this relatively narrow section of German society, however, there were important elements who either disapproved of or – as was the case with the anti-war USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party) and the radical-left Spartacists – actively resisted the arguments put forward by the anglophobe extremists. This means that anglophobia, although quite clearly a national issue in 1914, also became, later on, a sectional if not a class issue, one that contributed directly to the ideological polarisation of German politics as a whole in the final years of the war.

If anglophobia cannot be separated from the underlying class antagonisms in German society, however, then nor should it be treated in isolation from the equally violent Germanophobia that took hold of British society during the same period.³² Indeed, looking beyond the Nazi era, German anglophobia can hardly be seen as being any better or any worse than some of the other manifestations of national and ethnic hatreds which characterise modern warfare in the age of mass communications. Such hatreds may lie dormant for several decades, only to be revived by fresh political upheavals or group conflicts. At other times the memories of such conflicts are deliberately exploited by specific groups and individuals with an axe to grind. It is somewhat ironic, for instance, that many of the anti-English slogans employed by Germany in both world wars were derived from formulas originally used during the French revolution and Napoleonic period.³³ To this the Germans added slogans of their own, arising from the political and economic frustrations of the 'generation of 1848' or the arguments of a later generation of nationalists in favour of the development of a powerful German navy.³⁴

Finally, the alert reader might legitimately ask why I speak of 'anglophobia' as opposed to 'Britannophobia'. In part this is merely a matter of linguistic usage: the German language has traditionally employed the word 'England' to cover all areas of the British Isles, even in circumstances where 'Großbritannien' is clearly the intended meaning, and in deference to that tradition I have done the same throughout this book. Notwithstanding the linguistic issue, the failure to distinguish accurately and at all times between two very different entities – England and Britain – also reflected a more immediate and striking set of assumptions about the all-important role of the state in shaping national character. Indeed, as Eckart Kehr first argued back in the 1920s, the chief weakness of German historiography had always been its tendency to confuse the state-idea with its current political form, a practice which also encourages identification with history's winners as opposed to its losers.³⁵ This was no less the case with narrative constructions of English history than it was with constructions of German history itself.

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Thus it was quite possible for German historians, before and after 1914, to conceive of Englishness as if it were a uniform characteristic of all of those different national groups and individuals who had contributed to the growth of 'English' state power since the sixteenth century, and to leave out consideration of those who had opposed it.³⁶ Furthermore, it was also possible to define 'British' imperialism as if it were merely an outgrowth of 'English' Puritanism, an ethical system which was seen to encourage aggressiveness and worldly success at the expense of genuine philosophical contemplation.³⁷ In fact, as we shall see in chapter 2, it was in only a very small number of instances that attempts were made by German historians and other propagandists to include or exclude the Celtic fringes (Scotland, Wales, Cornwall) in their cultural construction of England as an enemy. The one clear-cut exception to this rule was Ireland, which was conveniently defined, alongside India, Egypt and the former Boer Republics, as an object of 'British' imperialism rather than as an integral part of the 'English' or (later) 'Anglo-Saxon' war effort.³⁸

If anglophobia was a more problematic and more volatile aspect of German wartime politics than it might at first seem, however, and also a less easy concept to define, this does not mean that its effects should be trivialised or made harmless as a result. On the contrary, it is one of the central theses of this book that the German preoccupation with 'enemies all around', with competition for world power and with the search for a 'place in the sun' took on a new and more brutal form after the outbreak of war in 1914. Although my main subject is German attitudes towards England, I have found myself devoting a considerable amount of attention to wartime developments within the German Conservative party, the various nationalist leagues and the radical right more generally. In so doing I have also tried to address the issue of which individuals and organisations were responsible for laying the political foundations of the extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism of the post-war era, which even before 1923 had claimed the lives of a number of prominent liberal and left-wing statesmen. Why this was allowed to happen, why the hatred and violence directed outwards between 1914 and 1918 were later applied with full force against the 'internal enemy' is indeed the most disturbing question to arise from the study of German anglophobia during the First World War.

1 *Unser gehasstester Feind*. German anglophobia and the 'spirit of 1914'

The outbreak of the First World War saw Germany temporarily united by an outburst of patriotic solidarity that bridged the divisions inherent in the Wilhelmine structure of society. Under the *Burgfriede*, or domestic political truce, proclaimed by the Kaiser on 1 August 1914, previously outcast minorities such as the Social Democrats and the Jews were now to be readmitted to the national community. The Reichstag – in accordance with the wishes of the government – also voted unanimously for war credits when it met on 4 August. The few warning voices raised in opposition (and they were at first very few in number) could not make themselves heard or were easily suppressed. It was only in the 1920s that pacifist organisations in Germany felt confident enough openly to declare a 'war on war'.¹

Even so, the war had not come wholly without warning and to more critical observers it was obvious that diplomatic and military preparations had been laid well in advance. From the turn of the century, for instance, and especially in the immediate pre-war years, Germany's armed forces had been considerably strengthened and its armaments subject to technological improvements.² In addition to military rearmament, there had also been a 'rousing of minds', as the popularity of books such as Friedrich von Bernhardi's *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg* (1912) clearly illustrates. War was consciously viewed by many of Germany's rulers as an 'escape forwards', a solution to the countless political, social and economic problems inherent in German society.³ In this they were urged on by the propagandist agitation of the so-called 'new right', the nationalist associations such as the Pan-German League and the Navy League.⁴ And in 1914 even oppositional movements such as the German Social Democratic Party came to see in the war an opportunity to overcome stagnation within its own ranks, while individual mavericks such as the Marxist Paul Lensch proclaimed the 'German war' as the start of the 'world revolution'.⁵

The outbreak of war also saw a transformation of the mood and activities of historians and other members of the academic profession. Through a wave of patriotic publications – poems, war lectures and