Several years ago, I was invited to contribute a paper to a panel on the history of English studies during the Third Reich at one of the annual meetings of the Anglistenverband, the organization of German-speaking university professors of English. I had learned that there had been resistance to including a section on this topic in the first place, and during the presentation of the papers I was able to observe a good number of heads shaking in disagreement and dismay. After the section, the organizer and presenters were confronted with insinuations that their scholarship was “befouling the nest” of English studies in Germany and Austria. I, for one, was accosted by a colleague during a reception the same evening to learn that my paper on medieval English philology between 1933 and 1948 had been interpreted as a personal insult to the strong feelings of filiation that colleague felt towards all those who had held his own position at his university before him (he had pictures of all these predecessors hanging in his office, I was told, and he hoped that his successor would continue the tradition by adding his own picture to the office wall).

This episode is not untypical of the reactions historians of an academic discipline encounter when their histories encroach on the realm of living memory, when they revisit the reputation of former thesis advisors, mentors, and friends of colleagues in their readership or audience. More generally speaking, historians of the discipline of literature and language study, even when researching the more remote past, are considered with suspicion by their colleagues, because they appear to have abandoned the immediate realm of “literary” or “language study,” but have taken up “doing history.” Both these reasons have kept many a German scholar from doing the Trauerarbeit necessary to understand the path their respective disciplines have taken.

Until recently, English studies, a latecomer among academic disciplines in Germany and Austria after Classical, German, and Romance philologies in the late nineteenth century, has done especially little to learn from its own history. The early efforts by Thomas Finkenstaedt and his Augsburg colleagues were extremely helpful in gathering and publishing otherwise inaccessible information, but there was often little critical distance to their findings. More recently, the History of English Studies initiative (HES) has begun to investigate English studies within the context of European academia, and the results - more theoretically
informed – are very encouraging (see my review of Balz Engler and Renate Haas’s *European English Studies: Contributions towards the History of the Discipline*, in *Prolepsis*, 2003).

However, it is revealing that the most detailed research on the cultural history of English studies in during the Third Reich has been produced not by an Anglicist, but by Hans-Rutger Hausmann, a Romance scholar at the University of Freiburg.¹ And while his *Deutsche Geisteswissenschaft* im Zweiten Weltkrieg contains abundant information about the formation of German Anglistics between 1940 and 1945, the first edition of his monograph, published in 1999, has – to my knowledge – not been reviewed by any of the German journals in English studies. I intend to break with this tradition of disregard and to focus my review for *Prolepsis* on the role of Anglistics within the larger canvas Hausmann depicts. My review is based upon the second edition of the volume.²

Hausmann’s study offers first of all a thorough investigation on the role of the humanities during the Third Reich. It provides insight into the organizational structures of academic and educational policies, scholarly discourses, and the politicization of these structures and discourses by the Nazi regime. Since much of the information on these topics has been lost, Hausmann reconstructs his results based upon a painstaking assessment of auxiliary sources, including archival papers, letters, memoirs, interviews, and a myriad of academic and governmental publications. The picture evolving from his observations is that a good number of German scholars in the humanities worked hand in hand with their government to support – on the level of scholarship and higher education – the nation’s general war effort. This outcome of his work challenges numerous post-war constructions of the humanities as peaceful, uninvolved in, or even resistant to Nazi ideology. While Hausmann documents that language and literature scholars mostly stayed away from active anti-Semitic propaganda, he leaves no doubt that many of them geared their work toward some of the programmatic catchwords (*Reich, Blut, Boden, Rasse, Raum, Geist*, etc.) the German government favored. Indeed, only very few publications escaped the invasive omnipresent ideologization, and the allegedly unpolitical nature of scientific and philological paradigms proved much less unreceptive to ideological adaptations than revisionist voices in the 1950s and 1960s would make us believe. If open declarations of allegiance with the regime were most often limited to the paratextual features of academic texts, Hausmann demonstrates that an appalling number of Nazi ideologemes managed to enter into academic discourse. They spawned numerous investigations and, under the mantle of serious academic research, legitimated some of the most “hair-raising claims” (p. 27).

The specific plan to forge the German humanities into an active branch of the intellectual mobilization of the entire country, the so-called “Aktion Ritterbusch,” had its sources in ideas developed as early as the aftermath of World War I. Then, the demise of the German Empire was in part blamed on the paucity of information Germany had accrued about the mentality of its various enemies. As a result, more culturally oriented curricula soon blossomed before and especially after 1933, all meant to help gather vital information about other nations in all areas of knowledge. Several years into Hitler’s rule, political functionaries and their academic representatives laid out the first plans for the wholesale functionalization
of the humanities as a political tool of the Nazi government. The general goal of such plans was to replace individual scholars’ research with “guided” group projects organized according to the “Führer” principle. Cadres of scholars, following streamlined guidelines strategies, were meant to contribute to academic work with a preordained political objective, provide evidence of the superiority of German scholarship, help decide the war through their ideological support, and establish an intellectual framework for the new (post-war) European order. Shortly before the beginning of Germany’s invasion of its western neighbors, in the spring of 1940, the president of the University of Kiel, the jurist Paul Ritterbusch, called upon all German scholars in the humanities to collaborate on a communal project which was sometimes called “war action” (Kriegseinsatz) or “Ritterbusch action” (Aktion Ritterbusch). Initiated and sponsored by the German Department of Education and Science (Reichsministerium für Erziehung, Wissenschaft und Volksbildung), 67 publications resulted from these efforts in the areas of Classical Philology, English Philology, Geography, History, German Studies, Art History, Oriental Studies, Philosophy, Romance Philology, and Jurisprudence. The involvement of several other areas (e.g., Musicology, Linguistics, Psychology) never moved beyond the planning stage.

Since these ramifications and the detailed activities in the other subject areas have been discussed by other reviewers, I shall concentrate my observations on the area of English Philology: Hausmann identifies the Bonn Anglicist Wolfgang Schmidt (since 1944 Schmidt-Hidding) as the ideological “driving force” (p. 159) among English scholars. He served as the official spokesperson of the German Anglicists, was actively engaged in organizing an inclusive participation of all his colleagues in Ritterbusch’s intellectual “war action,” but in the end preferred active war duty in the field from 1942 to 1944, mostly in military units responsible for translation. Together with his colleagues, Paul Meissner (Breslau), Carl (Karl)-August Weber (Tübingen), and (later) Wilhelm Horn (Berlin) he coordinated the contribution of English studies to Ritterbusch’s academic masterplan. Hausmann presents three versions of the English studies concept which visualize essays by all German professors of English. He clarifies, however, that we cannot be sure if all scholars listed had actually agreed to being listed. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine the willing participation of Levin Schücking (Leipzig), a scholar whose critical stance against national socialism was no secret, or of Herbert Schöffler (Köln/Göttingen), who was not impressed by the academic qualifications of the project’s ideological leaders. However, these leaders did everything they could to make the project plan palatable to their colleagues. In addition to stressing the role of the publications as part of a patriotic war effort, they underlined the “strictly academic” nature of their work and assured them that they would not be required to write “journalism” (p. 161), an essential distinction dear to university scholars since the academizing of language and literature study in the nineteenth century. Moreover, they promised that contributors would not be asked to write on something outside their immediate areas of specialty.

The central goal of the English studies project can be gleaned from its title(s): “England and Europe: The Segregation of English Forms of Life and Art” (version I), “England and Germany in Europe” (version II), or “England and Europe” (version III). Quite obviously, the publications were meant to reveal how England
had developed away from the common Germanic stock of ideas and mentality: cultural ideology, language, literature, philosophy, economics, England's view of Germany, Germany's view of England, Britain's infiltration by foreign influences, international "Anglo-Saxon" (Canadian, U.S., Indian, etc.) views of England and Europe, German views of Shakespeare, etc., were among the main areas in which such differentiating work was meant to be done. This detailed "völkisch" comparison between the two nations intended to praise England and the empire in all those areas (institutional, legal, cultural) that had rendered it powerful, those areas, thus, in which Germany might learn lessons for its own progress and success; and it wanted to depict England as a hypocritical, morally worthless nation of merchants and peddlers out on a holy crusade against the German nation at least since the nineteenth century.

Due mostly to the further development of the "real" war, only a handful of the envisaged Ritterbusch publications materialized. One of them, Paul Meissner's volume on the "Basic Forms of the History of English Intellectual Thought" (Grundformen der englischen Geistesgeschichte, 1941), may serve as a representative example of what the new German "Englandwissenschaft" actually looked like. In addition to the editor's introduction ("Leitaufsatz: England und Europa in geistespolitischer Beleuchtung"), it included five substantial contributions: Emil Wolff ("England und die Antike") discussed the typically English reception of Classical antiquity; Hans Glunz ("Nationale Eigenart im mittelalterlichen Schrifttum Englands") identifies national idiosyncrasies in medieval English texts; Paul Meissner ("England und die europäische Renaissance") depicts the Renaissance as a period during which rationalism and irrationalism strive for predominance in English thought; Walter Hübner ("Mandeville's Bienenfabel und die Begründung der praktischen Zweckethik in der englischen Aufklärung") documents the victory of empirical and utilitarian thinking during the English enlightenment; and Harro de Wet Jensen ("Die englische Romantik und Europa") sees English Romanticism as the last period during which (under the influence of German idealism) the isolationist and segregationist mentality of the English national spirit encountered any notable resistance.

An in depth reading of this or any of the other volumes would, of course, have gone beyond the scope of Hausmann's survey. Since I have read several of the chapters for Meissner's volume, I would like to stress that each contribution to such a publication needs to be read individually and with great caution. For example, Emil Wolff's essay, had it not been published as part of the larger Ritterbusch project and accompanied by its political ambitions, would hardly be linked with any ideological intentions. Hans Glunz's essay (although Glunz himself certainly does not qualify as a wholehearted supporter of the Nazi regime) with its attempt to reveal the beginnings of the English drive to cultural superiority as early as in the medieval period is, in my opinion, the result of what one might call "guided research." I doubt that Glunz, whose own book on medieval aesthetics (Literarästhetik des Mittelalters, 1937) would incur the wrath of a 299-page review by Ernst Robert Curtius, would have written on this topic or within this paradigm of research at all, had it not been for the Ritterbusch project at hand. Invited to contribute an essay from his own area of specialty, he got closer than Wolff to what the project leaders requested he look for. Finally,
Paul Meissner’s own contributions, the introductory essay somewhat more than the longer essay on the English Renaissance, are geared fully toward meeting the programmatic expectations of the intellectual support for Germany’s war against England. His activities may be due in part to simple opportunism. His 1922 Bonn dissertation (advisor: Wilhelm Dibelius) on the figure of the farmer in English literature (Der Bauer in der englischen Literatur) is decidedly unexciting reading and completely without political leanings. As in so many walks of life during the Third Reich, the government’s ideological nudging and the possibility of a prestigious position and advancement offered a chance to those otherwise relegated to the realm of mediocrity.

In any case, even just a look at one of the Ritterbusch volumes in the area of English studies demonstrates that only individual judgments should be made and that each contributor and his essay or volume deserves individual attention and a thorough look at the political, academic, and biographical ramifications. It is communis opinio that those anglicists wholeheartedly involved in the Ritterbusch plan were not among the shining stars of the profession. Herbert Schöffler, who knew most of these activists fairly well, had this to say about them: Will Héraucourt “has no real knowledge in his specialty area”; Reinhard Hoops is “immature”; Heinrich Matthes is “a bore”; Wolfgang Schmidt is “a loudmouth with nothing to back it up”, and Robert Spindler is a “pedagogical sergeant”. However, dismissing these scholars and their work as mediocre and without lasting effects obfuscates that a good number of their publications survived and were inducted, their propaganda fully intact, into their respective fields’ “halls of fame,” i.e., seminar reading lists, bibliographies, and university libraries. German scholars in the humanities, represented by luminaries such as Ernst Robert Curtius, convinced their colleagues worldwide – and themselves – that German philological scholarship, due to its allegedly unpolitical science-like orientation, had remained impervious or even resistant to Nazi propaganda.

Will Héraucourt’s habilitation, for example, Die Wertwelt Chaucers. Die Wertwelt einer Zeitwende (1939), which abounds with direct and indirect support for Third Reich ideologies, is one of the very few German publications in Chaucer studies continually listed and quoted in major bibliographies and studies. Muriel Bowden, in her 1949 Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, admiringly called the study “exhaustive” (p. 46); F. N. Robinson, in his bibliography to the revised edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (1957) ensured that the monograph would gain acceptance as an essential source for explanatory and textual notes. Robinson mentioned it as one of only twenty-seven titles under the category “General Criticism,” together with famous names such as Kittredge, Manly, Lewis, and Mossé. John H. Fisher listed it – in one breath with Margaret Schlauch and Sheila Delany – as an important social reading of Chaucer in his essay, “Scala Chauceriensis,” in Joseph Gibaldi’s widely distributed MLA volume Approaches to Teaching Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (p. 40); today’s most widely used scholarly edition of Chaucer’s texts, Houghton Mifflin’s Riverside Chaucer, includes the title among the book-length studies and collections of essays which are “frequently cited” in its explanatory notes (pp. 790-93). Finally, Larry D. Benson, in his “Reader’s Guide to Writings on Chaucer” (in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Derek Brewer, 1974, repr.
1990, p. 329), praises it as “a model for further studies.” As a scholarly study, Die Wertwelt Chaucers was recognized and categorized as one of those typically reliable, because philological and positivistic, German studies. Had all these recommending readers actually read the entire study and not simply used it as a quarry for solving specific questions (Curtius’s famed European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages is the most egregious example of a similar kind of resource; few users have read the entire opus grande), they would have noticed that the volume invents a German(ic) Chaucer on the basis of the interplay of philological positivism and nationalist/racist ideology.4

Perhaps, however, it is German Anglicists who, had they cared to do the necessary Trauerarbeit in the six decades since the end of World War II, could have suggested that studies like Héraucourt’s do not deserve to be thought of as representative of the very best German English studies has to offer to its colleagues world-wide. Frank-Rutger Hausmann’s revealing work in “Deutsche Geisteswissenschaft” and in “Anglistik im Dritten Reich” provides ample information for helping scholars to decide which texts need foregrounding when compiling seminar reading lists or bibliographies. His chapter on the role of English studies for the “Aktion Ritterbusch” is obligatory reading for any and all who would like to know about the development of their discipline. And only those who will take the time to look at the history of their discipline will understand the genesis of many of the scholarly practices they tend to take for granted.

Notes:


3 Quoted according to Hausmann, “Anglistik im ’Dritten Reich’,” p. 196.

KEYWORDS: History of English Studies, Humanities during the Third Reich, History of English Studies as a Discipline, Scholarship and Totalitarianism, Philology and Ideology

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