

FROM THE ARCHIVES
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Wittgenstein on British Anti-Nazi Propaganda: A Fragment

Abstract

This paper contains a historical introduction and an edition of a hitherto unpublished manuscript of Wittgenstein's that was found among G. H. von Wright's materials kept in Helsinki. The document concentrates on British anti-Nazi propaganda and was written in 1945. Wittgenstein's criticism of this kind of propaganda, such as that promoted by Robert Vansittart, is also present in other sources of this period belonging to both the *Nachlass* and the correspondence.

Introduction, by Nuno Venturinha

An Unknown MS in Helsinki

During a research stay at the von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives (WWA) at the University of Helsinki in October 2009, I found among von Wright's Wittgenstein-related materials a two-sheet manuscript in English focusing on British anti-Nazi propaganda, with both sheets written on the front (recto) and back (verso) sides. The document was kept in a box labelled "Rhees Material", which included a typescript entitled "Wittgenstein's letters to Rhees – a

complete (?) set”, certainly by von Wright, with the following information on page 3:

14.3.51. [prefaced by a “√” in handwriting]

30.3.51.

One undated letter, addressed to 96 Bryn Rd., Swansea.

Between letters 11.6.49. and 5.12.49 there were *two sheets in Wittgenstein’s hand / not copies/*. Also two incomplete copies of letters; one in German, another in English. (WWA, Box 511, my emphasis)¹

As someone familiar with Wittgenstein’s handwriting and on the basis of the description provided, I had no doubt that this was an autograph of his and in all probability a piece of correspondence. In fact, I could not remember any item in the literary *Nachlass* exactly matching this text. I brought back photocopies of the two double-sided pages with me and checked whether they had been included in the *Innsbrucker elektronische Ausgabe* of Wittgenstein’s *Gesamtbriefwechsel*. But the answer was negative. I went to the *Bergen Electronic Edition* of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* just to make sure that they were not there. Indeed they were not.

I then wrote to the WWA, which had been recently established, about my findings and realized that apparently no one there was aware of the existence of this original of Wittgenstein’s. After having been granted permission to publish the document by Trinity College Cambridge, the owner of the Wittgenstein copyright, I came to the conclusion that the transcription of the text should be made by a native-speaker of English. Thus I invited Jonathan Smith, archivist of Trinity, to edit the manuscript with me.

Origins of the Helsinki MS

How did the document come to be in Helsinki? On the first page of his typewritten catalogue “The Rhees Material”, dated “Cambridge, November 1990”, von Wright wrote:

¹ There is actually, on page 2 of this inventory, a letter dated 31.8.49 listed between those of 11.6.49 and 5.12.49, but only the latter ones are marked with a “√”.

Papers connected with the work of Rush Rhees as commentator, editor, and co-owner of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. Separated from other papers and materials in the home of Rush Rhees in Swansea by GHvW in July 1989 and later transferred to the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge where they were kept in six big cardboard boxes. The content of the boxes was examined by von Wright in connection with his visits to Cambridge in 1990.

[...]

The examination of the material by vW at Swansea and later at Cambridge took place under circumstances which were unfavourable in the sense that he had not full access to the unpublished and published material which is kept elsewhere. The identification of the items in the boxes is therefore sometimes conjectural or left open. (WWA, Box 511)

Among the descriptions of the items, we find references such as “*Must be identified*” (I, 2), “*This must be further checked*” (III, 7), “*Requires further examination*” (III, 8; III, 17), “*Make further checks*” (III, 11) or “*One copy taken away by GHvW*” (IV, 11).² It is thus conjecturable that the document on anti-Nazi propaganda had also been taken by von Wright to Helsinki to be further examined and that it was later put to one side.³ In a description of his own archive, typed with the assistance of Risto Vilikko, dated “Helsinki, February/October 1997”, we do not find any allusion to the manuscript in the summary of Box 511. On page 28 one can read:

Material relating to Rush Rhees. Includes a complete (?) set of copies of letters from Wittgenstein to Rush Rhees and to Mrs Joan [*sic*] Rhees. Lists made by GHvW of the Rhees material now in the Wren Library. (von Wright 1997)

² Roman numerals refer to the box numbers and Arabic numerals to the items. A new catalogue of the materials has been produced by Jonathan Smith and is available at Trinity College Cambridge.

³ In a passage from his autobiography, von Wright reports: “The [Wittgenstein] originals were first kept with Elizabeth Anscombe in Oxford and with Rush Rhees in London. I myself have never, with only some insignificant exception, kept with me papers which have been written or dictated by Wittgenstein.” (2001, 159, translation from the Swedish kindly made by Thomas Wallgren). The original runs thus: “Originalen förvarades till en början hos Elizabeth Anscombe i Oxford och Rush Rhees i London. Själv har jag aldrig, på något obetydligt undantag när, hos mig bevarat papper som skrivits eller dikterats av Wittgenstein.”

But the summary of the box on page 28 contains this information in addition:

Also a document dictated by Rhees to his wife shortly before he died and given to GHvW by Mrs Peggy Rhees when GHvW visited Rhees's home in Swansea in the Summer of 1989. (von Wright 1997)

It is a two-page typescript described in handwriting as “This document was given to me (GHvW) by Mrs Peg Rhees when I visited her in Swansea in July 1989”, which contains, among other remarks made by Rhees on 21st May 1989, the day before he died, the following remark on the second page:

Von Wright must be given the unpublished manuscript. (WWA, Box 511)

We shall never know if “the unpublished manuscript” here alluded to coincides with the Helsinki MS, but it is a possibility.

The Helsinki MS in the Context of the *Nachlass*

What we do know is that Wittgenstein wrote more about Nazism and this can help us to contextualize the document. At the end of MS 151, we can find a couple of pages which are very similar in content to the Helsinki text. There Wittgenstein writes:

Sir it is pathetic /ridiculous/ to see all the discussion going on about the harmfulness of ~~the~~ gangster films to the young while the minds of both adults & children are being systematically poisoned by the ~~four~~ worst kind of Vansitartt [*sic*] propaganda made by the ^{cinema} newsreels /newsreel comments in our cinemas/, & condoned /inspired/ by the M.O.P. Can there be anything more ~~swinish~~ /~~four~~/ evil than the ~~gloating~~ war news of ~~the~~ British Movietone News unless it be that of Universal News? The gloating over dead ‘Huns’ over the old German cities [*sic*] flattened /razed to the ground/ over German civilians ~~who~~ walking ~~about~~ among the ruins of there [*sic*] towns? Everybody knows about /Nobody doubts/ the ^{unspeakable} horrors of the Nazi Regime which are perhaps comparable only to ...

He goes on to say:

When they were in full swing ^{long} before the war ~~had started~~ & even after it had started we heard very little about them ... Now /Now that the enemy is completely finished to use the words/ all the well known tricks of the camera & the

by far nastier ones of the commentators are set into ~~action~~ ^{motion} to ~~make~~ ^{represent} the German people to the unthinking cinema goer ~~look~~ /~~appear~~/ ~~like~~ a /as one/ pack of wolves. The commentators are worthy pupils of Dr Goebbels, of worst kind of Germans. We are not writing this letter in what would be a crazy expectation to open the eyes of the blind, but to direct the attention of the seeing to a horrid evil the lying propaganda the germ of Nazism itself. (BNE/IDP, MS 151, 46–47, transcription slightly amended)

There are various names and topics that appear in both these two sources, among them “horrors”, “Vansittart propaganda”, “cinema newsreels”, “M.O.P” or “Ministry of prop.”, “Dr Goebbels”, “Nazism”, “Germans” and “commentators”. The two texts are definitely interrelated, but it is difficult to say that one is the draft of the other since their content is not identical. One thing is certain: the Helsinki MS is far longer and better organized than the text in MS 151. But since in MS 151 it is said that “We are not writing this letter”, should we attribute the Helsinki MS to Wittgenstein only or is it a joint work? And is it a letter?

Contrary to the draft of the letter found in MS 151, the Helsinki MS is written by Wittgenstein in the first person, with passages like “I should like to express my admiration...” or “These are only a few points in which I think these newsreels...” being found. It therefore represents Wittgenstein’s own view on the subject, with the text exhibiting the character of a short article, eventually distinct from the letter. According to Ray Monk in his biography of Wittgenstein, the recipients of the letter must have been the “makers” of such “newsreels” – even though he writes “Sir”:

He also found the movie newsreels, which used to be shown before films, unbearable. As war with Germany approached, and the newsreels became more and more patriotic and jingoistic, Wittgenstein’s anger increased. Among his papers there is a draft of a letter addressed to their makers, accusing them of being ‘master pupils of Goebbels’. (Monk 1990, 423–424)

However, the letter could have been intended to be sent to a newspaper editor, the Editor of *The Times* for instance.

The Helsinki MS and the Correspondence

There are two letters in the Wittgenstein correspondence that also mention “newsreels” and that are a great help in situating the Helsinki MS. The first is a letter to Jean Rhees (born Henderson), Rush Rhees’ wife at the time, dated 8 April 1945, in which Wittgenstein writes:

I’m depressing company these days. It’s, at least partly, the war, which seems to me to be getting more & more horrid as it draws to its end. And I wonder even if the end is quite as close as those seem to think who already book seats for the V-day procession. The cinema news reels are getting more beastly & gloating every week. The Germans are lucky, because their re-educators are already appointed; but who’ll re-educate the English? (IEA)

The second is a letter to Victor Gollancz dated 4 September 1945, in which we find:

I have read your article ‘In Germany Now’ in the ‘News Chronicle’ of August 27th and was glad to see that someone, publicly and in a conspicuous place, called a devilry a devilry. A friend, when I praised your article to him, gave me your pamphlet on Buchenwald.

I am deeply in sympathy with your severe criticism (and it cannot be too severe) of the cruelty, meanness and vulgarity of the daily press and of the B.B.C.. (Our cinema news reels are, if possible, more poisonous still.) It is because I strongly sympathise with your attitude to these evils that I think I ought to make what seems to me a serious criticism of your polemic against them. I shall try in this letter to put the main line of my criticism in a sketchy way [...]. (IEA)

Yet this letter to Victor Gollancz also contains some interesting remarks towards the end. Wittgenstein states:

If you ask me why, instead of criticising you, I don’t write articles myself, I should answer that I lack the knowledge, the facility of expression and the time necessary for any decent and effective journalism. In fact, writing this letter of criticism to a man of your views and of your ability is the nearest approach to what is denied me, i.e., to writing a good article myself. (IEA)

Could the Helsinki MS be an attempt to write such an article and not only a letter as the one we find sketched in MS 151? It is a plausible conjecture. Another point of interest is that Gollancz was also a critic of Robert Vansittart, something documented in Josef Rothhaupt's "Ludwig Wittgenstein und Victor Gollancz" (1995), which includes this letter to Gollancz and his short reply, first published in Ruth Dudley Edwards' *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (1987).

The Helsinki MS and Vansittart

The figure of "Lord Vansittart" seems to be the intermediate link in all this story. In his *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day*, Philip M. Taylor, who held the first chair in International Communications in the UK, points out:

It was rare for British wartime films to portray the idea of a 'good German'; if they did, they would have been out of step with a public opinion heavily influenced by the phenomenon known as 'Vansittartism'.

In a series of broadcasts made on the BBC's overseas service in late 1940 by Lord Vansittart, former Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, the Germans were portrayed as historically violent and aggressive, with Nazism being merely the latest manifestation of this national characteristic. [...]

[...] the underlying message of all this material was that Nazism itself was an atrocity and all Germans were guilty of it. If any further 'proof' was required, newsreel footage of Belsen and the other concentration camps was to provide it at the end of the war. (Taylor 2003, 220–222)

In the Helsinki MS, Wittgenstein not only mentions Lord Vansittart but also an "L. Michel", who was actually Leslie Mitchell. In MS 151 a reference is also made to "British Movietone". Youtube features a MovieTone News film entitled "Lord Vansittart on the German Atrocities (Interview with Leslie Mitchell)", which carries the following description:

Cut story – Lord Vansittart & Leslie Mitchell walk in the former grounds, into camera. SCU of both Mitchell asks questions about atrocities, Vansittart replies. CU Vansittart, 'there are some good

Germans but they are in the minority’. ‘Atonement impossible’. Various shots of him SCU, CU etc. as he speaks about Germany.⁴

This was certainly one of the films Wittgenstein had in mind.

The Date of the Helsinki MS

In the Digital Newsreel Archive of MovieTone we find the same description of this 140-second film and, more importantly, its date: 30 April 1945.⁵ Taking into account this date and the dates of the letters to Jean Rhees (8 April 1945) and Gollancz (4 September 1945), the Helsinki MS must have been written sometime between April (or May) and September 1945. But what about the date of MS 151?

In his catalogue “The Wittgenstein Papers”, von Wright classifies MS 151 as “Large notebook. Called C7. 1936. 47 pp. Mainly in English” and describes it as containing “Largely notes for lectures, 1936” (1993, 488 and 497). Michael Nedo, in his *Introduction to the Vienna Edition*, also situates the writing of MS 151 in 1936 (1993, 36). And Alois Pichler, in his *Untersuchungen zu Wittgensteins Nachlass*, also dates MS 151 to 1936 (1994, 125). There seems to be thus an incompatibility between the date of MS 151 and the other pieces of evidence. But we should not forget that the draft of the letter appears *at the end* of MS 151 and therefore may have been written later.

In fact, we know that Wittgenstein spent various periods during the war in Swansea, more specifically between 1942 and 1945 (Monk 1990, chs. 21–22; Nedo 1993, 41–44). In a letter to Rhees dated 19 January 1945, after returning from Christmas in Swansea, Wittgenstein wrote:

Oh Hell! I bought the Hibbert Journal. Ewing's article is quite different from what I expected. It's stupidish & academical but *not* unkind. It

⁴ Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIgXIGKjFo>> [Accessed 19 November 2018].

⁵ This information is available at <http://www.movietone.com/N_search.cfm?ActionFlag=back2ResultsView&start=1&pageStart=&V_DateType=&V_DECADE=&V_FromYear=&V_QualifySubject=&V_TermsToOmit=&V_ToYear=&V_searchType=&V_MainSubject=&V_Year=&V_resultsPerPage=1&V_storyNumber=45700> [Accessed 19 November 2018]

treated the Germans as prospective inmates of a reformatory school, managed on modern, humane principles. In fact the whole tone of the Journal surprised me as being rather human. (IEA)

The article in question was A. C. Ewing's 1944 "The Ethics of Punishing Germany", which shows that the theme was discussed with Rhees. Some months later, in a letter to Norman Malcolm of 17 August 1945, sent from Swansea, Wittgenstein says he "got here a few days ago & should like to stay all through September"; he also says that "Rhees [...] is here & I see a good deal of him" (IEA). And in another letter to Malcolm, undated but written a few days later, he affirms:

Perhaps I ought to feel elated because the war is over. But I'm not. I can't help feeling certain that this peace is only a truce. And the pretence that the complete stamping out of the 'aggressors' of this war will make this world a better place to live in, as a future war could, of course, only be started by them, stinks to high heaven &, in fact, promises a horrid future. (IEA)

It is a reasonable conjecture that Wittgenstein alone had written the Helsinki MS in Swansea, from where he wrote the letter to Gollancz. On 8 September 1945 he writes again to Malcolm "still in Swansea" (IEA). And on that day he also writes to Rowland Hutt from Rhees's home in Swansea saying that he wishes "to stay here until the end of the month or the beginning of October"; he confesses a bit further on:

I don't feel well; partly because I'm having trouble with one of my kidneys, partly because whatever I read of the triumphant beastliness of the Allies in Germany & Japan makes me feel sick, partly because I am no better than I am. (IEA)

In the last Swansea letter to Malcolm, dated 20 September 1945, he expresses some disappointment for his nearly finished book and then avers:

This, however, doesn't worry me. What I hear about Germany & Austria does. The re-educators of the Germans are doing nicely. Pity there won't be many left to enjoy the fruit of re-education. (IEA)

Wittgenstein must have stayed in Swansea until the beginning of October, as announced to Hutt, for on 6 October 1945 he is writing

to Malcolm again saying that “I’m back in Cambridge & feeling pretty lousy” (IEA). The period spent in Swansea, suffering all these concerns, thus appears to be the most probable time for the writing of the Helsinki MS, with this happening either before or after the writing of the letter to Gollancz. It is also perfectly plausible that Wittgenstein had planned to write a letter with Rhees, sketching it at the end of MS 151, which, for some reason, he had with him. This would justify why the Helsinki MS remained among the Rhees papers. As a matter of fact, it is possible that it had been Rhees who typed the letter to Gollancz. But the Helsinki MS may also have been sent by Wittgenstein to Rhees later since, according to von Wright, it was found “Between letters 11.6.49. and 5.12.49”, both published in the *Gesamtbriefwechsel*.⁶ In this hypothesis, the final pages of MS 151 may have been written by Wittgenstein elsewhere too, with or without Rhees, for it is not clear to whom the “We” refers.

The Helsinki MS and Other Letters: Conclusions

Von Wright’s description of the material accompanying the Helsinki MS includes, besides the letters dated “14.3.51.” and “30.3.51.”, “One undated letter, addressed to 96 Bryn Rd., Swansea” and “Also two incomplete copies of letters; one in German, another in English” (WWA, Box 511). The first two letters were the last Wittgenstein wrote to Rhees and the address on the undated letter “96 Bryn Rd., Swansea” was Rhees’ address. The incomplete copy of the letter in English is of another letter to Rhees of 20 April 1946. But the incomplete copy of the letter in German is, astonishing as it may seem, of a letter to Friedrich Waismann of 19 May 1936 – with this letter thus being contemporary to MS 151.

There are various puzzles around this manuscript that still need to be solved. However, there seems to be no doubt that it covers a subject that preoccupied Wittgenstein greatly during an important time of his life and that it helps us to understand his views regarding

⁶ See note 1 above. These dates are written in pencil at the top of the left-hand margin of what looks like the first page of the Helsinki MS even though it is the third. Above them the word “mellan”, Swedish for “between”, is written in blue ink.

World War II and what led to it. In the 1930s Wittgenstein had already discussed with Piero Sraffa some of the issues that became crucial years later. In a letter to Sraffa dated 31 January 1934 he wrote:

You said: ‘The Austrians *can* do most of the things the Germans did’. I say: How do you know? What circumstances are you taking into account if you say they can?

And after making some remarks about physiognomy, Wittgenstein said:

I am interested to know what phrases the Austrians will use when they’ll have turned Nazi. Supposing their patriotism is only talk then I’m just interested in their future talk. (IEA)

A long letter of Wittgenstein to Sraffa dated 11 March 1934 recently acquired by Trinity College Cambridge (Add ms a 427/97a) also focuses on these issues. It is most probably the one Wittgenstein announces to have written in another letter to Sraffa of 11 March 1934 (see IEA), a first version of which is mentioned in a letter dating from 27 February 1934 (see IEA). But these are matters that lie outside the scope of the present work.⁷

⁷ This document is published by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge. Additional thanks are due to Thomas Wallgren, the Head of the von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Helsinki, and Bernt Österman, the curator, for hosting me as a visiting researcher in October 2009 and March 2017, and for their overall support. I am particularly indebted for a digitalization of the document made at WWA after my discovery which was kindly sent to me. I also wish to thank Alois Pichler, who organized a working meeting on the new *Bergen Electronic Edition* at the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen in October 2011 where I first discussed the edition of this MS; Radmila Schweitzer, who organized an expert discussion of the Wittgenstein Initiative at the “Haus Wittgenstein” in Vienna in December 2016, where I presented an earlier version of this Introduction; and Joseph Wang, from the Brenner Archives Research Institute at the University of Innsbruck for precious help with the correspondence. Last but not least, my thanks to Jonathan Smith as well as Alois Pichler, Simo Säätelä, Thomas Wallgren and Rob Vinten for insightful comments and suggestions.

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Diplomatic transcription, by Jonathan Smith in collaboration with Nuno Venturinha

[[2r¹]] I should like to express my admiration for the Vansit[t]art excellent psychological technique & ~~filming~~ of the Vansit[t]art etc propaganda now in full swing in our Cinema Newsreels. It is wise to learn from our enemies & the Newsreel reporters & their sponsors in the Ministry of prop[aganda] ~~are as good a copy~~ have learnt a lot of Dr Goebbels as he could have wished ~~to make~~ for. The slow crescendo of horrors – the horrors of G[erman] camps long known to the authorities are released – show in films the almost complete suppression of all the truth about the hopeless struggle of masses of Germans against Nazism & of the terrible suffering of Germans under that regime. The theatrical tone of justice & righteousness indignation in which the commentators deliver this ... the glib lyrics of Lord Vansit[t]art himself in his interview with L[eslie] Mi[t]chel[,], the tone of moderation with which he ~~sows~~ covers ruthlessness & cruelty makes one feel that this propaganda would be ideally suited for a country that were going /which was preparing to go/ fascist itself. These are only a few points in which I think these newsreels might be overdoing their stuff. It might be argued that even the most unthinking audience might [[2v]] ask themselves if whether for the most terrible crimes of Nazis[m] a more terrible retribution is desirable ~~conceivable~~ thinkable than the complete devastation of Germany /that which has already been meted out to them/, the death and imprisonment of all their male & youth who, when they will be released, will have nothing to look forward to in life[,], in fact, the converting of Germany into a kind of huge prison camp with starvation, disease & destitution. ~~I say:~~ Given the present facts, what greater punishment could a human wish to you wish to inflict on a nation. Unless you are ~~Lord Vansit[t]art~~ a kind of frustrated dictator like ~~Lord Vansit[t]art~~ have the mentality of Lord Vansit[t]art which is really that of a Nazi Fascist leader, indeed without of course the strength & efficiency /intelligence/ which is perhaps even necessary

Of course, cruelty has no better ally than mushy thinking & sentimentality & this is well illustrated by E. Newman[’s] article in the He writes²

Isn’t it perhaps unwise to urge ~~us now~~ the audience never to forget the G[erman] atrocities when ~~our~~ their good memory might recall the betrayal of Czechoslovakia in Munich at a time when the horrors of the G[erman] camps were well known to the B[ritish].

[[1r]] Many decent people who feel sick at heart of this ‘horror’ propaganda don’t permit /allow/ themselves to say so /~~admit~~ this even to themselves/ because they are

¹ See note 6 of the Introduction above.

² It seems that a quote was to be inserted at this point.

afraid ~~that perhaps they are~~ of being callous & of not ~~enough~~ being willing enough to 'face the facts'. Whereas they really feel 1) that all these horrors are already being paid for. ~~& that~~ ^{without any}³

2) that what they demonstrate is not the depravity of the German nation ^{in particular} but rather what can happen ^{in a short time} in a country in which the worst elements, for whatever reason, rise to the top.

3) that we can only hope that similar things will not happen in this country[.]

4) that if anything can bring this about it is just the base propoganda now inspired by the government[.]

5) that nothing good, nothing even profitable to this coun[[1v]]try, can arise out of an attitude which is at bottom the very attitude of the Nazis only this time directed towards the German nation not towards the Jews.

Biographical Notes

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Jonathan Smith (b. 1961) has been Archivist at Trinity College Cambridge since 1991 where he works for the most part with the papers of modern academics. Publications include "Circuitous processes, jigsaw puzzles and indisputable results: making best use of the manuscripts of Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*", *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol 36, Issue 6/1 (2012), and "Wittgenstein's Blue Book: reading between the lines" in *The Textual Genesis of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Nuno Venturinha (Routledge, 2013).

³ Wittgenstein will have added the period after "paid for" to render the additions superfluous.