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H.G. FIEDLER AND GERMAN STUDIES AT OXFORD

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Taylor Institution Library

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H. G. Fiedler (1862–1945) was Professor of German at Oxford from 1907 until his retirement in the late 1930s. He was still very active in the field after his retirement, with his *Oxford Book of German Prose* published in 1942. He died on 10 April 1945, shortly before the German surrender (Hitler committed suicide on 30 April). Professor Fiedler had huge influence over the field of German Studies at Oxford in the first half of the twentieth century. This article presents some of the evidence we have in the archives of the Taylor Institution Library.

Professor Fiedler came to Oxford from Mason College, later the University of Birmingham, where he had established the School of Modern Languages. He was appointed chair of German at Oxford in 1907.¹ This was a new post: Modern Languages had previously been taught alongside other courses. The Final Honour School in Modern Languages was established in 1903, after years of debate.² Classicists had raised particular objections, fearing that the new school would divert students and resources away from classical studies, to the detriment of the University: ‘We are about to reverse the Renaissance’.³

Fiedler, by contrast, championed the new school. We can learn a little about his attitude to the study of Modern Languages from a report in the *Oxford Cosmopolitan* of a lecture on World Literature that he gave in 1908, very shortly after he took up his post in Oxford. He

has often wondered whether something could not be done towards removing international prejudice by a more comparative study of European

¹ Charles Firth, *Modern Languages at Oxford 1724–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 84.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.



FIG. 1. Bust of H. G. Fiedler, Taylor Institution.

literature in our schools and Universities. It would take the student beyond the limits of his own nationality, would lead him better to understand the ideals and aspirations of other nations and make him conscious of the solidarity of mankind; and as “the progress of the world was not made by converting the old, but by educating the young”, he did not think it was too much to hope that such understanding would be a pledge for the peace of the world and would make war more and more impossible.⁴

These are very ambitious learning objectives, and may seem particularly optimistic given the lecture was delivered only a few years before the outbreak of World War One. Nevertheless, this belief in the potential of language learning is a thread that runs through the whole of Fiedler’s career, notwithstanding the two world wars that framed it.

A practical result of this belief was the organization of an Anglo-German exchange in 1910 (German visitors to England) and 1911 (English visitors to Germany).

The objects of the visit in each case will be to enable representatives of the rising generation to make themselves better acquainted with the life, customs and institutions in England and Germany respectively, as it is felt that nothing is so likely to dissipate the prevailing cloud of misunderstanding and apparent mutual distrust between the two nations, than such better acquaintance between the peoples.⁵

⁴ ‘World Literature’, *Oxford Cosmopolitan*, 1 (1) (1908), 3–4.

⁵ ‘Anglo-German Students’ Visits’, *Anglo-German friendship societies and exchanges, including Rhodes scholars*, Oxford, Taylor Institution Library, Fiedler Archive, MS.80.G.52.

Fiedler was a very active ambassador for German culture, founding the German Literary Society, organizing German-language theatre productions, lectures and poetry readings. The first performance in Oxford of a German play by professional actors was Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* in 1908, shortly after Fiedler had arrived in Oxford. A contemporary review records that this performance was made possible by Fiedler, who encouraged the director to attempt it.⁶ Fiedler was well-connected in literary and cultural circles, not least as the brother of Max Fiedler, a renowned conductor. Fiedler was a long-standing friend of Gerhart Hauptmann, with whom he corresponded from their first meeting in 1905 until 1938. They met after H. T. Gerrans, a Mathematical Lecturer at Oxford and a long-standing supporter of Modern Languages, proposed that Hauptmann should be awarded an Honorary D. Litt by the University of Oxford in 1905. A reception was organized at Worcester College, where Gerrans was Bursar, and Fiedler was among the guests.⁷ Hauptmann went on to fictionalize Fiedler as Professor Geiger in *Vor Sonnenuntergang* (1932).⁸ He was also acquainted with Albert Einstein, who in his diary records walking with Fiedler during a visit to Oxford.⁹

Fiedler was also a dedicated teacher, and very supportive of his students. He intervened to help the German poet Ernst Stadler, who ran into trouble with his college and was very nearly prevented from submitting his thesis. Fiedler organized an extension,¹⁰ and the archives contain a photograph of the poet and a telegram sent to Fiedler by Stadler assuring him that the thesis has finally been sent.¹¹

Fiedler's best-known student was Edward, Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, whom Fiedler tutored from 1912 to 1914. There are many notes and letters from Edward in the archive right up until the Second World War. In one note, written in German, Edward asks—a real period piece—to be excused from a tutorial because 'ich muss Morgen auf die Jagd gehen'.¹² Fiedler and Edward became very close, and Fiedler maintained a book of newspaper cuttings about Edward VIII for the rest of his life.¹³

Fiedler accompanied Edward on a tour of Germany in 1913, travelling incognito, but nevertheless meeting all the nobility—the archives contain photo albums¹⁴ and diary entries describing the trip, as well as certificates of honours granted by both the British and the German nobility.¹⁵

⁶ Fiedler Archive, MS.80.G.11.

⁷ Francis Lamport, 'H.T. Gerrans: a man of many parts', *Worcester College Review* (2002), 54–61.

⁸ Daria Santini, 'Fiedler, Hermann Georg (1862–1945), German scholar', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 (Oxford University Press) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/62275>> [accessed 22 November 2021].

⁹ Andrew Robinson, *Einstein on the Run: How Britain Saved the World's Greatest Scientist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 176.

¹⁰ Richard Sheppard, *Ernst Stadler (1883–1914): a German expressionist poet at Oxford* (Oxford: Magdalen College, 1994), p. 15.

¹¹ Fiedler Archive, MS.G.SAUTER- MS.G.STADLER 4516.

¹² Ibid., MS.Fol.G.12.

¹³ Ibid., MS.80.G.62.

¹⁴ Ibid., MS.80.G.30.

¹⁵ Ibid., MS.Fol.G.12.

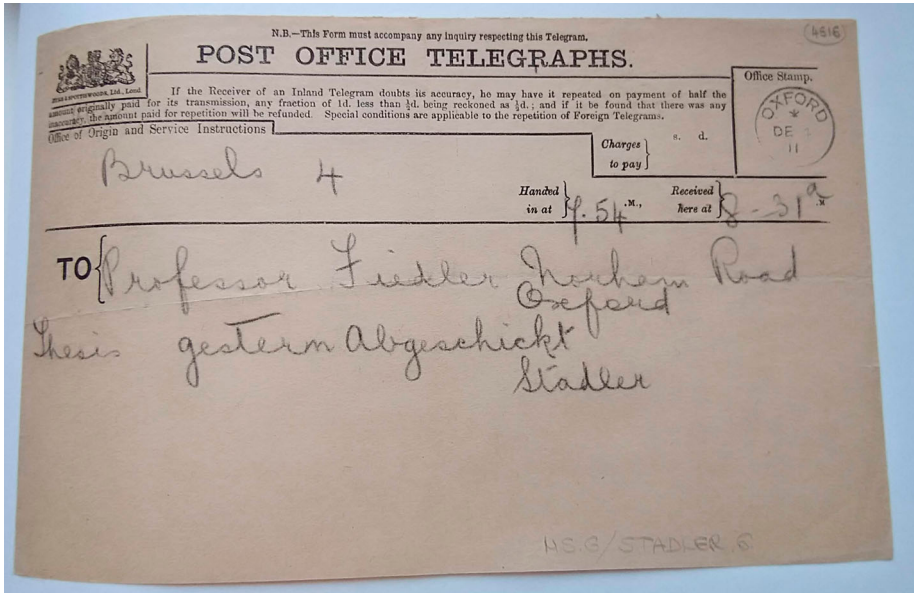


FIG. 2. Telegram from Stadler assuring Fiedler that the thesis has been dispatched. Fiedler Archive, MS.G.SAUTER-MS.G.STADLER 4516

The longed-for peace and mutual understanding was not to be. The archive contains a rather poignant seating plan and menu from a banquet for the German Ambassador, Prince Lichnowsky, hosted by the German Literary Society in the summer of 1914, shortly before the outbreak of war.¹⁶

The war was, of course, devastating personally, with colleagues and former students fighting on both sides. Stadler, for example, was killed at Ypres towards the end of 1914. The grimness of the time can be illustrated by correspondence with Henry Allpass, a poet and former student of Fiedler's (1911–13). He became a master at St Bees School in Cumbria, but remained in contact. He is present on the seating plan of the 1914 banquet. Allpass was called up for military service, but remained in touch with Fiedler even when fighting at the front in France. He continued to work on Grillparzer and made arrangements for his notes to be returned to Fiedler in the event of his death, which is presumed to have occurred on the day his final letter to Fiedler is postmarked (16th September 1916).¹⁷

Allpass' mother wrote asking Fiedler to send work to her son, whom she believed for many months to be a prisoner of war, and this may have contributed to Fiedler's support for an initiative to provide education to prisoners on both sides. Prince Lichnowsky was also an active supporter of this initiative.¹⁸ The location of the Allpass' Grillparzer materials is unknown, but after the war, a collection of his

¹⁶ Ibid., MS.8°.G.50.

¹⁷ Ibid., MS.Fol.G.11.

¹⁸ Ibid., MS.80.G.62.



FIG. 3. (a and b) Photos of the 1913 tour of Germany. Fiedler archive, MS.80.G.30.

writings was published, including a text intended as an introduction to *Die Abnfrau*. A copy of this book is in the Fiedler collection.¹⁹

Fiedler was viciously attacked by the student newspapers, and offered his resignation in 1915, which was refused. He was a charismatic man and already had a great many friends and supporters in Oxford. Marked newspaper clippings show how hurt he was by the comments. They also show how his many friends leapt to his defence in letters to the editor.²⁰

The belief Fiedler expressed in 1908 in the power of education to increase mutual understanding seems to have continued, and even to have been strengthened by the war. Demand for the study of languages soared—a letter from the Clarendon Press in 1926 notes that Fiedler's book of German verse for schools has set a record.²¹

Fiedler's efforts to promote mutual understanding continued, as he continued to preside over the German Literary Society, and arrange regular student exchanges, up to and including 1939 (a list of applicants, with a summary of their reasons for wishing to participate in the exchange, is in the archive).²²

Also in the archives is a recording Fiedler made of a basic German language course, with key phrases you would need for travelling in Germany in the 1920s—having a fire made up in your room, arranging for your luggage to be sent from the station and so on.²³ The recording, along with Fiedler's handwritten scripts, is available online.²⁴ They demonstrate his dedication to his teaching—this was very new technology, only made available to private citizens a year or so before the recording was made.

What was Fiedler actually teaching during this period? What did he select in order to help his students 'understand the ideals and aspirations of other nations'?²⁵ We have a lot of lecture lists in the archives.²⁶ Figure four shows lectures given for the Honours course in Michaelmas Term in 1918, 1926 and 1935. The most obvious feature is the increase in the number of lectures offered over this period. In 1918 they are all given by Fiedler, with a strong focus on early German and a few key authors. In 1926 there is another lecturer, and a broadening of the curriculum, and notably, one lecture by a woman, Miss Deneke. In 1935 there are four men and two women giving lectures, with Fiedler still giving the majority, but other significant names appear, including two of his successors, James Boyd and Ernest Stahl.

Hilary Term and Trinity Term follow a similar pattern. In the 1920s there is more of an emphasis on cultural studies, history and philosophy, as well as literature, while in 1935 the lectures are on language and literature only. Some of the topics can still be found in the current curriculum.

¹⁹ H. B. K. Allpass, *Oxford, St. Bees and the Front, 1911–1916* (London: Laurie, 1920).

²⁰ Fiedler Archive, MS.80.G.32.

²¹ Ibid., MS.80.G.41 (supplement).

²² Ibid., MS.80.G.54.

²³ Ibid., MS.80.G.40.

²⁴ To be found at <https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/german-resources/free-online-resources>.

²⁵ 'World Literature', pp. 3–4.

²⁶ Fiedler Archive, MS.80.G.50.

1918		1926		1935	
Introduction to Old High German	Fiedler	Old High German Texts	Fiedler	Historical German Phonology	Fiedler
German History and Literature from the beginnings to the 12 th century	Fiedler	Old and Middle High German Texts	Fiedler	Walther von der Vogelweide	Fiedler
Goethe's Leben und Werke	Fiedler	Literature of the 18 th century	Fiedler	Goethe: Faust, Part 1	Fiedler
Klopstock, Wieland, Lessing, Herder	Fiedler	Goethe's Faust, Part II	Fiedler	Deutsche Literatur von Hebbel bis Hauptmann	Fiedler
Schiller's "Braut von Messina"	Fiedler	Deutsche Romantik	Fiedler	German Literature of the 12 th and 13 th centuries	Boyd
Composition	Fiedler	German History, 1500-1700	Montgomery	Goethe: Iphigenie	Boyd
Easy Translation and Composition	Fiedler	Grillparzer and Hebbel (Prescribed texts)	Montgomery	Composition (4 classes)	Boyd, Bostock, Stahl
		Readings in German Philosophy of the Eighteenth Century	Montgomery	Introduction to Middle High German	Bostock
		Advanced Composition	Montgomery	Shorter Old High German strophic poems	Bostock
		Schiller's view of poetry	Miss Deneke	Lessing: Hamburgische Dramaturgie	Stahl
				Einführung in das Studium von Schillers Werken	Miss Blochmann
				Main currents in German Eighteenth-century Literature	Miss Deneke
				Composition	Miss Deneke

FIG. 4. Lectures given for the Honours course in Michaelmas Term in 1918, 1926 and 1935. Fiedler Archive, MS.80.G.50.



FIG. 5. Group photo of faculty(?), 1930s. Taylorian Archives, Taylor Institution Library.

A photo from the 1930s (Figure 5) shows Fiedler seated in the centre. Miss Deneke, the first female lecturer in German at Oxford, is in the row behind him. Women students outnumbered men in Modern Languages studies until 1914,

although the numbers were converging by the end of that period.²⁷ From 1920 to 1928, 241 men and 251 women took the Honours School in Modern Languages.²⁸ Teaching was overwhelmingly by men, however. It would be interesting to investigate whether the Modern Languages Faculty was particularly supportive of women staff and students, considering the relatively high numbers of female students. The early female lecturers at the Taylorian, such as Miss Deneke, were unpaid.²⁹ The exact circumstances of their employment would require further investigation. Firth notes that they were supplied by 'the Societies of Women Students.'³⁰ Fiedler himself seems to have been supportive of women's education in principle. His sister, Elise Fiedler, completed her studies at Birmingham, becoming the university's first Doctor of Literature in 1903.³¹ The name of Miss Deneke, the first female lecturer of German, will be well-known to students of Lady Margaret Hall, where she was a significant figure. The college still holds her archive.³²

A key concern for Fiedler in the 1920s was the proposed extension to the Taylor Institution building, which was fiercely opposed by the Ashmolean. The Ashmolean also wished to expand and saw the Taylor Institution and adjacent buildings as the ideal site for their new galleries. They proposed that the Modern Languages Faculty move to a site between Christ Church and Folly Bridge.³³ The fact that the Taylorian won out against the Ashmolean, and the extension was built, is a testimony to the importance that was attached to the study of languages after the First World War.

Thanks to Fiedler's lasting relationship, Edward Prince of Wales opened the extension in 1932. His bust is still prominently on display in the entrance to the extension.

Fiedler's relationship with Germany during the 1930s is very complex. He had spent his life promoting Germany and German culture and was now in his 70s. The German propaganda ministry was keen to exploit Fiedler's royal connections and his love for Germany. A letter from the 'Reichsschriftumsstelle beim Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda' dated 1936 contains an invitation to write a reminiscence of the 1913 tour of Germany for the German Press, and is signed by a Kurt Fiedler.³⁴ Further research would be needed to ascertain whether they were related and whether H. G. Fiedler took up this invitation.

What Fiedler did do, was help Edward VIII (now abdicated) write a broadcast in German which was made in Germany in 1939. Edward writes to him: 'If only there had been more such [student exchange] organizations and less of the propaganda on both sides, our two countries would not have got themselves into the unfortunate antagonistic state of mind which obtains in some quarters today'.³⁵ Had

²⁷ Firth, *Modern Languages at Oxford*, p. 91.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

³¹ Progress in Education: 'Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Rosebery's Scheme', *London Daily Mail*, 6 July 1903, p. 3 <<https://newspaperarchive.com/other-articles-clipping-jul-06-1903-2570164/>>

³² Lady Margaret Hall, *The Collections* <<https://www.lmh.ox.ac.uk/about-lmh/history-and-archives/collections>>.

³³ Firth, *Modern Languages at Oxford*, pp. 131–48.

³⁴ Fiedler Archive, MS.Fol.G.12.

³⁵ Ibid.



FIG. 6. One of the posters from the Fiedler collection, Sackler Library. Photo credit: Conservation & Collection Care Department, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. See also <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about/libraries/our-work/propaganda-posters-conservation>

Fiedler's passion for language, education and mutual understanding led, not to world peace, but to appeasement?

In 1936 Fiedler attended the Goethe Gesellschaft conference in Germany, where he gave a lecture to great applause, again speaking of the power of language and culture to overcome conflict.³⁶ In 1939, possibly during a visit to Germany, Fiedler acquired a collection of Nazi posters now held at the Sackler Library in Oxford. They were part of a series known as *Parole der Woche*, which began in 1936 and continued until 1943. The series was intended for display in public squares, but also in hotels, railway waiting rooms, post offices and so on. It was not distributed freely, but had to be paid for by subscribers. To make it cost effective, it was printed on very thin, poor-quality paper. Early issues were text-heavy, didactic advertisements for Nazi ideology, while from 1939 they became more visual and more aggressive.³⁷ Fiedler's issues all date from 1939, and there are no records yet discovered as to how—or why—he came by them.

Possession of these posters is by no means evidence that Fiedler sympathized with Nazi ideology, however. The evidence is mixed. In his book of German prose,

³⁶ Daniel W. Wilson, *Der Faustische Pakt: Goethe und die Goethe-Gesellschaft im Dritten Reich* (Munich: dtv, 2018), p. 99.

³⁷ Franz-Joseph Heyen, *Parole der Woche: eine Wandzeitung im Dritten Reich 1936–1943* (Munich: dtv, 1983).

published in 1942, the publisher notes that Fiedler has ‘taken great pains to avoid anything controversial’. When the publisher asked for the removal of a work that could be construed as Nazi propaganda ‘of the more insidious kind’ (*Volk ohne Raum*, by Hans Grimm), Fiedler evidently complied with the request.³⁸ The book was published and was in demand for educational purposes in 1943. The summary notes of an application for the German exchange visit of 1939, where the applicant claims to admire the ‘new Germany’, is struck out of the application list.³⁹ It would be interesting to examine further how German Studies at Oxford, and Fiedler in particular, navigated this very difficult period, and how Fiedler’s passion for German culture may have influenced the wider political approach to Germany in the 1930s—because Fiedler was undoubtedly influential. The celebration of shared language and culture, the utopia of mutual understanding and world peace, appears in a very different light during appeasement.

Fiedler did not give up his desire to share his love of German culture, even though it must have become increasingly problematic. His passion is illustrated yet again by a letter he wrote to King George VI on 22 December 1943, enclosing a copy of the *Oxford Book of German Prose*,⁴⁰ just published. ‘I have tried to preserve in it some of the good things of the old Germany we loved’.⁴¹ Fiedler died a little over a year later, on April 10 1945, just before the end of the war. What was the old Germany that was so loved? Did it ever exist? And did Fiedler’s life-long passion for sharing his love of German history and culture contribute in any way to world peace, as he hoped? As we look to the role of the study of languages in society today, and lament the decreasing numbers of language students and closure of university departments, do we have as clear a vision of what the study of languages can achieve? What do we hope and dream for the study of Modern Languages today?

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Emma Huber is Subject Librarian for German at the Taylor Institution Library, one of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford. She has a background in Digital Humanities as well as Librarianship and combines the two in the Taylor Editions project (<https://editions.mml.ox.ac.uk/>), which teaches digital, information and public engagement skills, while also raising the profile of library collections.

³⁸ Fiedler Archive, MS.Fol.G.12.

³⁹ Ibid., MS.80.G.54.

⁴⁰ H. G. Fiedler, *Das Oxford Book of German Prose Von Luther Bis Rilke* (Oxford: Universitätsverlag, 1943).

⁴¹ Fiedler Archive, MS.Fol.G.12.