

# **P.G. Wodehouse and the Wartime Controversy Internment, Broadcasts, and the Shadow of Nazi Allegations**

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## **Abstract**

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, the celebrated humorist, faced significant controversy during World War II due to his internment by German forces in France and subsequent radio broadcasts from Berlin to the United States in 1941. These broadcasts, though intended to be light-hearted accounts of his internment, were perceived as collaboration in Britain, leading to widespread condemnation and impacting his reputation and later life, including a delayed knighthood. This monograph examines the facts surrounding the controversy, the opinions of his contemporaries and later scholars, and the lasting impact on his honors and life.

## **Introduction**

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (1881-1975) is renowned for his humorous literary contributions, particularly the Jeeves and Wooster series. However, his legacy is also intertwined with a contentious period during World War II. Interned by German forces in France in 1940, Wodehouse later made five radio broadcasts from Berlin to the United States, a neutral country at the time. These broadcasts sparked intense criticism in Britain, with accusations of Nazi sympathies that overshadowed his later years.<sup>1</sup> This monograph will delve into the origins of this controversy, analyze the views of his contemporaries and subsequent Wodehouse scholars, and detail the repercussions on his UK honors and other aspects of his life. The debate surrounding Wodehouse's wartime actions continues to shape perceptions of his work and character.<sup>3</sup> The stark contrast between Wodehouse's whimsical literary world and the harsh realities of World War II fueled this controversy. His escapist fiction, a source of amusement in peacetime, clashed with Britain's wartime mood, making his actions seem particularly inappropriate. His humor, often focused on upper-class trivialities, appeared out of touch with the national crisis. This situation highlights the complex relationship between artists and their political context, raising questions about their responsibilities during times of crisis and the ethical implications of seeming apolitical during significant historical events.

## **The Circumstances Leading to Internment**

In 1934, P.G. Wodehouse relocated to France for tax reasons, settling near Le Touquet.<sup>1</sup> As World War II began, he remained in France, working on *Joy in the Morning* during the "Phoney War".<sup>1</sup> The German invasion of France in May 1940 dramatically altered

this situation.<sup>5</sup> The rapid German advance surprised many, including the Wodehouses.<sup>6</sup> As German troops neared Le Touquet, the local RAF base withdrew.<sup>1</sup> Wodehouse reportedly refused to leave without his wife Ethel and their dog.<sup>1</sup> The couple made two unsuccessful attempts to evacuate to Britain . Their first attempt failed due to car trouble, and the second was thwarted by roads blocked with refugees.<sup>1</sup> The Germans occupied Le Touquet on May 22, 1940.<sup>1</sup> Wodehouse, as a British non-combatant, was initially required to report daily to German authorities . This brief period of relative freedom ended on July 21, 1940, when Wodehouse was informed of his internment due to his age being under 60 . This internment highlights the strict German policies towards "enemy nationals" . His initial decision to stay and the failed evacuation attempts suggest a possible underestimation of the danger or a detachment from the political crisis, perhaps due to his focus on his literary world.<sup>5</sup> This perceived lack of urgency later contributed to the criticism he faced in Britain.

## **Life in Internment Camps**

Wodehouse's internment began on July 21, 1940, at a former prison in Loos, near Lille . Conditions in Loos were severe, with multiple internees per cell.<sup>1</sup> Wodehouse, younger than his cellmates, slept on the floor.<sup>1</sup> The diet was basic, consisting mainly of soup and hard bread, which Wodehouse, with his stronger teeth, would bite apart for others.<sup>8</sup> He humorously described his cell.<sup>1</sup> After a week, he and others were transported to a former barracks in Liège, Belgium, run by the SS . Wodehouse likened the experience in the cattle truck to being a sardine.<sup>8</sup> Conditions in Liège were poor, with shortages of utensils, forcing internees to scavenge for bowls.<sup>8</sup> Wodehouse joked about finding a motor oil container.<sup>8</sup> After another week, they were moved to the Citadel of Huy . Huy had particularly unpleasant conditions, including a lack of blankets for Wodehouse for the first three weeks, forcing him to sleep on straw with a raincoat.<sup>8</sup> Food was scarce, leading internees to try eating unconventional items.<sup>8</sup> The Kommandant frequently ordered extra parades.<sup>8</sup> In September 1940, they were moved to Tost in Upper Silesia (now Toszek, Poland), a former lunatic asylum . Wodehouse found Tost an improvement . The regime was milder, and he was not required to do manual labor due to his age . Inmates could even stage concerts and cricket matches . In late December 1940, an Associated Press reporter interviewed Wodehouse, providing the first news of him in months . Wodehouse's ability to find humor in these situations, while perhaps a coping mechanism, may have been misconstrued in Britain as a lack of seriousness about the war.<sup>5</sup> The Nazis also recognized Wodehouse's potential propaganda value, giving him more comfortable conditions, including a writing room, unlike other internees who remained in Tost for years . This preferential treatment suggests a deliberate Nazi strategy to exploit his fame .

## **The Berlin Broadcasts**

Shortly before his 60th birthday, on June 21, 1941, Wodehouse was released from Tost and sent to Berlin . He was housed in the luxurious Hotel Adlon at the behest of German authorities . His wife Ethel later joined him . The controversial Berlin broadcasts originated during this period. Soon after his release, Wodehouse gave a radio interview to CBS correspondent Harry Flannery.<sup>6</sup> This interview was pre-scripted and later contributed to the controversy.<sup>6</sup> Following this, Werner Plack, a former Hollywood associate working for the German Foreign Ministry, suggested Wodehouse make short-wave radio broadcasts to the US about his internment experiences, assuring him they would not be censored . Wodehouse recorded five broadcasts between June 25 and July 26, 1941.<sup>6</sup> His primary aim was to reassure his American fans, who had sent supportive letters, that he was well.<sup>6</sup> He also intended to share his experiences humorously.<sup>6</sup> The broadcasts mainly consisted of humorous anecdotes about his internment.<sup>5</sup> He recounted his time in various camps with his characteristic wit.<sup>5</sup> His famous line exemplified this <sup>11</sup>: "Young men, starting out in life, have often asked me 'How can I become an Internee?' Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans came along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest....".<sup>21</sup> Notably, the broadcasts lacked political commentary, pro-Nazi sentiment, or attacks on the Allies.<sup>3</sup> They were directed at the American audience, as the US was still neutral.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the US War Department later used the transcripts as anti-Nazi propaganda, suggesting a subversive element despite their humor . Wodehouse's decision to broadcast reveals his political naivete and failure to grasp the propaganda value for the Nazis.<sup>3</sup> His primary motivation seemed to be connecting with readers and finding humor, without fully considering the implications of broadcasting from Nazi Germany.<sup>16</sup> The US using the broadcasts as anti-Nazi propaganda highlights the unintended consequences of his actions . While Wodehouse may not have intended to undermine the Nazis, his humorous portrayal could have subtly mocked them, making the broadcasts useful for Allied propaganda .

## Contemporary Reactions to the Broadcasts

News of P.G. Wodehouse broadcasting from Berlin in 1941 triggered an immediate and negative reaction in the UK . Astonishment and disgust were widespread upon hearing the beloved humorist on enemy radio . Wodehouse was quickly labeled a traitor, accused of broadcasting Nazi propaganda for his release . Members of Parliament called for his trial for High Treason . The BBC banned his work, and libraries removed his books . The public vilified him, comparing him to Lord Haw-Haw . A critical moment was the BBC broadcast on July 15, 1941, featuring a postscript by "Cassandra" (William N. Connor) of the *Daily Mirror* . This broadcast, approved by the Minister for Information despite BBC Governors' reservations, strongly condemned Wodehouse . Connor accused him of "selling his country" and used terms like "Quisling" . He portrayed

Wodehouse as living comfortably in Berlin while British soldiers suffered . This broadcast ignited public anger . Political figures also criticized him. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden stated Wodehouse had "lent his services to the Nazi war propaganda machine" . Quintin Hogg compared him to Lord Haw-Haw and expressed contempt . Some even called for treason charges . Fellow authors largely disapproved, with A.A. Milne's public condemnation being particularly hurtful . Milne, reportedly envious of Wodehouse's success, led the criticism, suggesting Wodehouse's "licence" as a humorist should be revoked . This caused a lasting feud . The intense reaction in Britain reflected wartime nationalism and a sense of betrayal . Wodehouse's broadcasts, regardless of content, were seen as a betrayal by speaking on enemy radio . The "Cassandra" broadcast exemplifies the power of wartime propaganda . The BBC's decision to air it, despite initial reservations, highlights the wartime sentiment in Britain . Most Britons had not heard Wodehouse's broadcasts, underscoring the danger of secondhand accounts fueling outrage .

## Reactions in the United States

In contrast to the UK, the initial reaction in the US to Wodehouse's broadcasts was less intense.<sup>6</sup> This was partly because the broadcasts were for an American audience and transmitted via short-wave radio, limiting their reach . Also, the US was still neutral, perhaps leading to less immediate outrage than in Britain, which was already at war . Wodehouse's pre-broadcast interview with CBS also drew some criticism for his phrase "whether Britain wins the war or not".<sup>6</sup> However, the overall US reaction was more varied, with some viewing Wodehouse as naive rather than malicious . Some recognized his apolitical nature and intention to reassure fans . Nevertheless, there were negative perceptions, such as the headline "Wodehouse plays Jeeves to Nazis" , indicating unease. Notably, the US War Department used the broadcast transcripts as anti-Nazi propaganda, suggesting a different interpretation of their message . The American reaction, geographically distant from the conflict, was more nuanced than the emotionally charged response in Britain . Wodehouse's humor might have been better received in a nation not directly experiencing the same level of threat and loss as Britain . The US government finding propaganda value in the broadcasts indicates a different understanding of their potential impact .

## Opinions of Contemporaries and Later Scholars

Over time, scholarly interpretation of Wodehouse's wartime actions has shifted from accusations of treason to viewing him as politically naive and making a serious error in judgment, not being a Nazi sympathizer . George Orwell's 1945 essay, "In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse," was influential in this reassessment . Orwell argued Wodehouse's actions stemmed from political unawareness and childlike innocence . Iain Sproat's 1981 book, *Wodehouse at War*, further supported this view, using MI5 files to argue his

innocence and publishing the broadcast transcripts . Other biographers and critics have echoed this, emphasizing his apolitical nature and focus on entertaining readers . However, some remain critical, arguing that even if naive, broadcasting from Berlin was irresponsible . The MI5 investigation concluded no grounds for treason prosecution, acknowledging his lack of malicious intent . Yet, reservations lingered in Britain . The prevailing view is that Wodehouse was naive rather than a collaborator . This contrasts with the intense wartime outrage . The passage of time and more information have allowed for a more nuanced understanding . However, the debate continues, highlighting the complexities of judging historical figures .

## **Impact on UK Honors and Later Life**

The wartime controversy significantly impacted P.G. Wodehouse's life, particularly regarding UK honors. He remained in the US from 1947 until his death in 1975 . He became a US citizen in 1955 but retained his British nationality . For years, UK honors were blocked due to his broadcasts . In 1967, a recommendation for Companion of Honour was opposed by the British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Patrick Dean, who argued it would revive the controversy and reinforce a "Bertie Wooster image" . Even in 1971, attempts to "bury the wartime hatchet" were opposed by the new ambassador, Lord Cromer . The Foreign Office also initially hesitated . It was not until 1975, shortly before his death, that Wodehouse was knighted, reportedly due to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's intervention . However, even then, there were dissenting voices . This delayed knighthood exemplifies the lasting impact of the controversy on his reputation in Britain . The British establishment held reservations for many years . The "Bertie Wooster image" argument suggests criticism of his literary persona in the post-war context . The eventual knighthood, so late in life, could be seen as a final recognition of his literary talent or a belated gesture from a nation that long viewed him with suspicion .

Beyond honors, the controversy damaged Wodehouse's public image in the UK for years . The BBC ban and library removals likely hurt his readership and income . Public animosity contributed to his self-imposed exile in the US . The feud with A.A. Milne strained personal relationships . Wodehouse acknowledged the "great deal of mental pain" he suffered . Despite this, he continued writing prolifically , showing resilience or perhaps a lack of full comprehension of the anger directed at him .

## **Allegations of Anti-Semitism**

In addition to the wartime broadcasts, P.G. Wodehouse faced allegations of anti-Semitism, primarily from his private letters . These include 1931 remarks about Jewish people in Hollywood , 1949 comments on "Jewish propaganda" in American books , and a 1952 negative reaction to Groucho Marx on television . Some Hollywood

screenwriters also suspected him of anti-Semitism . Philip Dunne believed Wodehouse's dislike of the Screen Writers Guild had an anti-Semitic basis . These remarks led some to label Wodehouse an "odious anti-Semite" . However, in his 1938 novel *The Code of the Woosters*, he satirized British fascism . Some admirers also point to his extensive work with Jewish individuals . The anti-Semitism allegations add complexity to the controversy, suggesting his wartime actions might not have been solely due to naivete . While the main controversy is about the broadcasts, these remarks raise ethical questions about his beliefs and their potential influence during the war . The ongoing debate highlights the difficulty of separating an artist's work from their personal beliefs .

## Conclusion

The controversy surrounding P.G. Wodehouse's wartime experiences is a complex issue. His 1940 internment and subsequent 1941 Berlin broadcasts led to accusations of Nazi sympathies in Britain. While intended as humorous accounts for an American audience, the broadcasts were met with condemnation in the UK, impacting his reputation and delaying his knighthood until shortly before his death in 1975. Scholarly interpretations have largely shifted towards viewing Wodehouse as politically naive rather than a collaborator, though some criticism persists. The controversy also had personal repercussions, leading to self-imposed exile and strained relationships. Furthermore, allegations of anti-Semitism add another layer of ethical complexity to his legacy. Ultimately, despite the enduring popularity of his work, the wartime controversy remains a significant aspect of P.G. Wodehouse's biography, highlighting the intersection of literature, politics, and the challenges of judging historical figures.

## Tables

Table 1: Chronology of P.G. Wodehouse's Wartime Experiences

Event	Date
Moved to France	1934
German invasion of Le Touquet	May 22, 1940
Internment in Loos Prison	July 21, 1940
Internment in Liège Barracks	August 1940

Internment in Huy Citadel	August-Sept 1940
Internment in Tost	Sept 1940-June 1941
Release from Tost and move to Berlin	June 21, 1941
First Berlin Broadcast	June 28, 1941
Last Berlin Broadcast	July 26, 1941
Return to Paris	September 9, 1943
Liberation of Paris	August 25, 1944
Moved to the US	1947
Became US Citizen	1955
Received Knighthood	January 1, 1975
Death	February 14, 1975

**Table 2: Summary of Contemporary Reactions in the UK**

<b>Name/Institution</b>	<b>Nature of Reaction</b>	<b>Specific Quotes or Actions</b>
William N. Connor ("Cassandra")	Condemnation, accusation of treason	Accused Wodehouse of "selling his country," used terms like "Quisling," implied he was comfortable in Berlin while Britons suffered.
A.A. Milne	Condemnation, public	Stated Wodehouse's "irresponsibility" and naivete



	disapproval	had gone too far and suggested his "licence" as a humorist should be withdrawn.
Anthony Eden	Criticism, accusation of aiding enemy propaganda	Observed that Wodehouse had "lent his services to the Nazi war propaganda machine".
Quintin Hogg	Condemnation, comparison to Lord Haw-Haw	Compared Wodehouse to the infamous Nazi propagandist and expressed contempt for his actions.
British Parliament	Calls for prosecution for High Treason	Members of Parliament demanded Wodehouse be tried for treason.
BBC	Refusal to broadcast his work	The BBC banned Wodehouse's works from being broadcast.
Public Libraries	Removal of his books from shelves	Some public libraries removed Wodehouse's books from their collections.
General Public	Vilification, comparison to Lord Haw-Haw	Widespread public anger and condemnation, often without having heard the broadcasts, leading to him being labeled a traitor.

**Table 3: Key Perspectives of Later Scholars**

Scholar	Main Argument Regarding the Controversy	Key Supporting Points



George Orwell	Wodehouse was politically naive and acted out of stupidity.	Argued that Wodehouse lacked political awareness and his moral development was akin to a schoolboy; his broadcasts were silly but harmless.
Iain Sproat	Wodehouse was innocent and the victim of a grave injustice.	Based his argument on MI5 files and other contemporary documents, highlighting the innocuous content of the broadcasts and the lack of any pro-Nazi or anti-British sentiment.
Robert McCrum	Wodehouse's behavior was incredibly stupid but not treacherous.	While critical of Wodehouse's judgment, he emphasizes the author's lack of understanding of the political implications and his primary motivation to connect with his readers.
Brendan Carroll	Wodehouse was naive and unaware of the propaganda value of his actions.	Suggests Wodehouse was trapped in his Edwardian mindset and failed to grasp the gravity of the situation or the potential for his broadcasts to be exploited by the Nazis. <sup>5</sup>
Some Critics	Even if naive, Wodehouse was irresponsible and provided comfort to the enemy.	Argue that regardless of his intentions, broadcasting from Nazi Germany during wartime was a serious moral lapse and could have been perceived as supportive of the enemy cause.

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#### Videos:

- 📺 P.G.Wodehouse after his Berlin broadcast: BBC4 Wodehouse in Exile