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## An 'irregular intellectual'

### Elizabeth Wiskemann in Berne

Guy Woodward

As author of *The Rome-Berlin Axis* (1949) and *Europe of the Dictators* (1966), the historian Elizabeth Wiskemann was influential in shaping mid-twentieth-century perceptions of the Second World War. This chapter re-examines Wiskemann's own wartime career in Switzerland, however, to which she was despatched in 1940 with a 'roving commission' to gather intelligence by the secret British department of enemy propaganda Electra House (EH), subsequently known as SO1 as part of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), and which later became the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) in 1941.<sup>1</sup> As a self-described 'irregular intellectual' based in the British Legation in Berne, Wiskemann established contacts with a wide range of individuals who travelled between Switzerland and belligerent or occupied territories including the German Reich, Italy, France, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> These contacts provided her with detailed information regarding living conditions, public morale and resistance activities in these places, which she relayed to London via encrypted telegram. Wiskemann described her intelligence-gathering activities in the memoir *The Europe I Saw* (1968), but gave no indication of how the information she sent back was used. Documents in the PWE papers reveal that some reports were used in the preparation of black propaganda campaigns, which sought to foment discord and resentment between civilian or military populations and their leaders. The papers also show that while in Switzerland, Wiskemann was involved in the dissemination of British propaganda publications and may have conducted espionage work on behalf of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6). Drawing on research in these papers, this chapter attempts to clarify and extend our understanding of Wiskemann as a 'secret agent' – a term used in a recent account of her career – but also outlines the significance of neutral Switzerland to these activities.<sup>3</sup>

## Before the Second World War

Wiskemann's pre-war career embedded her in networks which proved crucial for her wartime involvement in intelligence and political warfare. After postgraduate study at the University of Cambridge pursuing research into the French Second Empire, she divided her time between lecturing work at the university and vacation travels in Europe, reporting on the Nazis' rise to power during the 1930s for the *New Statesman*. On her arrival in Berlin in 1930 she was introduced to German intellectual circles by the *Manchester Guardian's* Frederick Voigt, later of the Foreign Office and who worked on British propaganda to Germany in the early years of the war. Wiskemann also met a range of significant German political figures, including Chancellor Heinrich Brüning and Ernst Hanfstaengl, 'Hitler's clever choice of propagandist for foreigners'.<sup>4</sup> In January 1931, she attended a rally at the Berlin Sportpalast, at which the future German Chancellor Adolf Hitler's chief propagandist Joseph Goebbels spoke. Besides Voigt, it is striking how many figures associated with British wartime propaganda Wiskemann had already encountered in the interwar period. In Britain, she knew Hugh Dalton, David Garnett, Rex Leeper and R. W. Seton-Watson; in Berlin, she associated with Vernon Bartlett, Darsie Gillie, Hugh Carleton Greene, Ivone Kirkpatrick, Arthur Koestler and Cecil Sprigge. Wiskemann's 1930s career indicates the extent to which British wartime propaganda organizations drew on pre-existing academic, diplomatic and journalistic networks and also suggests that direct experience of Weimar and Nazi Germany motivated individuals to pursue wartime roles in intelligence and propaganda.

Travelling to Berlin a few days after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on 30 January 1933, Wiskemann sensed that terrible changes were occurring in Germany. Reporting on the Federal elections a few months later, she became aware that a concentration camp had been established at Dachau.<sup>5</sup> Returning to London she sought meetings with political figures to discuss what was happening but made little headway. In July 1936, she was arrested and questioned by the Gestapo following a visit to Danzig and left Germany the next day. In London, she called on Leeper at the Foreign Office; he advised her to continue writing about the Nazis but not to attempt to return to Germany.<sup>6</sup> In early 1937, she was commissioned by the Royal Institute of International Affairs (also known as 'Chatham House') to write a study of Czech-German relations, an extended project which required her to give up her teaching post in Cambridge and spend much of the year researching the book in Czechoslovakia. On the outbreak of war in 1939, Wiskemann moved first with Chatham House to Oxford, where she worked for Arnold Toynbee's foreign research and press service. Finding this work unsatisfying, after six weeks she returned to London and set about trying to persuade the Foreign Office to send her to Switzerland, reasoning that she had trained herself as 'an observer abroad' and had helpful contacts in a country which occupied a 'key position' in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

### Wiskemann moves to Switzerland

Perhaps in the interests of secrecy, Wiskemann's published account of her recruitment to work in enemy propaganda is vague, but she recorded that she followed several

friends into Sir Campbell Stuart's department EH, which by Christmas 1939 decided to send her to Switzerland 'although only in a semi-official capacity'.<sup>8</sup> A contract with Oxford University Press to write a book on the country was arranged, as a means of explaining her presence to the Swiss authorities and of providing cover for her travels around the country and encounters with a wide range of contacts. In January 1940, Wiskemann travelled via Paris to Zurich, where she spent several months getting to know as many Swiss journalists and writers as possible. In May 1940, she was ordered to move to Berne, where a British Foreign Press Reading Bureau was being established at the British Legation, to scour the print media of belligerent and neutral countries for information to assist British intelligence and propaganda agencies (similar bureaux were established in Istanbul, Lisbon, Madrid and Stockholm).

The invasion of the Low Countries that same month necessitated the switch of systematic reading of the German press to Berne, and in addition to her conversational intelligence gathering, Wiskemann also began to compose summaries of German newspapers.<sup>9</sup> Some publications were readily available in the Swiss capital, while others had to be sourced in the countries of publication and brought over the border by agents and associates. Over the course of the war EH, SO1 and the PWE drew heavily on information gleaned from the foreign press: according to one document, SO1's French Section had become dependent on reports from Berne by August 1941.<sup>10</sup> The British Minister to Switzerland David Kelly was aware of Wiskemann's work for EH, and she appears regularly to have shared her reports with him, recalling that Kelly 'liked a few irregular intellectuals enrolled in war-time about the place, and gave me a remarkably free run then and later'.<sup>11</sup>

In her memoir Wiskemann suggested that 'My employers in London wanted above all to be informed about the *Stimmung* [atmosphere/mood] in Germany'.<sup>12</sup> The PWE papers show that she also relayed suggestions for British propaganda campaigns, however. Reporting in February 1941 that a Swiss contact had told her that rumours were circulating in Vienna that Hitler planned to invade England with Austrian troops, Wiskemann suggested that these fears could be played upon in propaganda 'to show exploitation and sacrifice of Austrians by Germans'.<sup>13</sup>

## Recalled to Britain

In early 1941, the Foreign Office moved to recall Wiskemann to London. She had already become 'dissatisfied' with her position and put in requests to return.<sup>14</sup> Writing to Leeper she suggested that relations with other legation bureaucrats were poor and that the work had become 'demoralising', since she had no idea for whom she was working, 'what was wanted, or whether what I sent ever reached anyone'.<sup>15</sup> In April, she began her journey home via Vichy France, Spain and Lisbon. Bureaucratic obstacles and a shortage of transport mean that she spent nearly four weeks in the Portuguese capital, which in contrast with sober Berne was a place of 'the wildest cloak-and-dagger stories'.<sup>16</sup> She was initially regarded with suspicion by the British

authorities there, even after telling them she worked with Campbell Stuart; only the intervention of SIS officer Rita Winsor prevented her from being treated as an 'impostor'.<sup>17</sup>

Wiskemann's exact involvement with SIS in Berne is unclear, but a memo suggests that Claude Dansey, SIS chief of active espionage – who had run SIS operations in Switzerland at the end of the First World War and also worked in Berne in late 1939 – was keen to see Wiskemann on her return.<sup>18</sup> SO1 were in turn anxious to prevent her meeting Dansey until she had reported to them: one internal note advised that Wiskemann would have to be 'very carefully instructed on her return to London' to 'prevent her from going all over the place'.<sup>19</sup> She expressed some apprehension about this situation in a letter to SO1's Thomas Barman, asking if she could be met in London by someone who could pass on instructions 'as to whither to proceed etc. . . . I won't know how to behave these days'.<sup>20</sup>

Arriving in Britain in mid-May, she was sent to SO1's country headquarters in Bedfordshire, where it is likely that she briefed propagandists on her findings in Switzerland and was trained for future activities. From there she wrote to Leeper on 23 June that she had 'dealt . . . with Germany + Italy' and was moving on to France and the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> Whenever she could, Wiskemann escaped Bedfordshire to London, Cambridge or Oxford, where a hectic schedule of overlapping professional and social engagements with contacts at the Foreign Office, the BBC and SIS awaited; she also met a series of Czechoslovak, Polish and Yugoslav exiles. Her position between SIS and SO1 appears to have been delicate and subject to conflict, and both agencies made plans to send her back to Berne on their behalf. Although this tug of war was won by SO1, documents in the archive suggest that she worked in some way with SIS in Switzerland. For example, Wiskemann mentioned in a letter to the PWE's Director General R. H. Bruce Lockhart in August 1942 that she had been working well with Count Frederick Vanden Heuvel, SIS chief of station in Berne, 'who most definitely wishes me to stay here'.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to London, she arranged a short-term post at the Ministry of Information (MoI) with an old Chatham House associate. July and August were frustrating months, however, as her future status and prospects of returning to Switzerland on a more secure footing remained unclear. The nascent PWE appears to have been determined to retain her services: Leeper wrote on 29 August 1941 that Wiskemann would be returning to Switzerland as 'our representative in Berne' and that her salary would be paid by the PWE, although her 'exact status' was a matter for the Foreign Office.<sup>23</sup> In the end she returned on an MoI salary, with legion cover of Assistant Press Attaché. Despite this, the PWE's Michael Balfour (also a historian who had travelled in Germany before the war) wrote in August 1942 that '[t]he whole of her time is occupied in obtaining intelligence for PWE'.<sup>24</sup> To the apparent 'horror' of administrators at the legation she was given a diplomatic passport and full diplomatic status.<sup>25</sup> Wiskemann returned to Berne in late September, with daunting instructions 'to collect and convey home all possible non-military information about all enemy and enemy-occupied Europe, roughly the whole Continent, the *Festung Europa*'.<sup>26</sup>

## Return to Switzerland

Wiskemann's work involved frequent travel around Switzerland, and by late 1942 she was spending two or more days a week outside the capital. Rising at 5 am, she would take a train at around 6 am to another city such as Geneva or Lugano for a 'long talk over lunch'. In September 1942, Balfour reported that Wiskemann is 'the kind of person who will do much better if left to her own devices':

Hers is very much a 'personal' show. She moves around as widely as she can, trying to establish friendly relations with sources which seem likely to be valuable. She gets the information she does – of a political or social rather than an economic or military character – because she gains the trust of people she talks to. . . . It would be fatal to try to formalise her too much.<sup>27</sup>

Wiskemann observed to Balfour the following month that 'I have to pick things up in conversation mostly without betraying too much interest'.<sup>28</sup> Her contacts were many and various. One source, Raymond Gautier, acting director of the Geneva-based League of Nations Health Organization (predecessor of the WHO), observed that 'she knew everyone in Switzerland and had their complete confidence'.<sup>29</sup> Gautier was able, through Wiskemann, to pass on information from doctors of various nationalities.<sup>30</sup> Other sources also held posts in the international organizations based in the country, such as Carl Buckhardt of the International Red Cross and Willem Visser t'Hooft, a Dutch pastor who served as provisional general secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and had contacts among Dutch, French and German resistance groups. Unlike most legation staff, Wiskemann was allowed to meet enemy subjects; she reported that one contact at the Vichy French Embassy ('100 per cent anti-German') was a particularly useful source of information.<sup>31</sup> Soon after her return from London in autumn 1941, she was introduced to a German Catholic journalist based in Berne, who, 'went in and out of the German Legation as he chose', was constantly meeting arrivals from Germany and Italy and in whose presence German Legation staff spoke freely.<sup>32</sup> Wiskemann recalled that this unnamed figure, who regarded Hitler as a 'fiend' and wished to help the British defeat him, provided her with 'information of great value' every other week until late in the war.<sup>33</sup>

Frequent travellers were also useful sources: Wiskemann spoke to Swiss journalists based in Germany when they returned home to visit their editors, and businesspeople who travelled between Switzerland and neighbouring territories. Sources cited in December 1942 include an Italian monarchist, a Berlin clergyman, some 'Dutch printers escaped to Switzerland', a 'Reliable German industrialist' and an 'Austrian Baroness domiciled in Switzerland', recently returned from a visit to relations in Vienna and Graz in Austria and Maribor in occupied Slovenia, where she reported that resistance to the occupiers was strong.<sup>34</sup> A young Montenegrin, ostensibly studying theology in Berne, was one of several Yugoslav Communist contacts who brought Wiskemann news of Tito and the Partisans. Evidence mounted in their reports that the Partisans were doing the bulk of the fighting against the Axis while General Draža Mihailović's royalist resistance forces backed by the Allies were holding back or even

collaborating with the occupiers. Against the advice of the anti-communist Director of the US Office of Strategic Services in Switzerland, Allen Dulles, Wiskemann relayed this intelligence back to London – a Pilot telegram dated 4 December 1942 notes that Mihailović was ‘unreliable and inactive’.<sup>35</sup> She later claimed that her intervention had contributed to the Allied switch to support Tito towards the end of 1943.<sup>36</sup>

## Wiskemann’s reports

Wiskemann’s reports were sent to the Foreign Office via Empax telegram or Pilot cyphers where the PWE’s more secret activities were concerned. The Foreign Office passed down these communications to the PWE, which played a gatekeeper role in relaying information to the BBC’s European Intelligence Unit, the Ministry of Economic Warfare and the Service departments.<sup>37</sup> Wiskemann reported regularly on the reception of propaganda, identifying several causes of dissatisfaction with BBC radio broadcasts. She was not shy of offering advice regarding propaganda strategy. Writing to Balfour in August, she repeatedly advises that British propaganda should aim to ‘pierce the screen’ and make Germans aware of atrocities committed by the Gestapo in occupied countries.<sup>38</sup> It is unclear how welcome such suggestions were, but when Wiskemann proffered advice gathered from a French contact who recommended scattering more ‘drops of poison’ – using written materials and rumours in addition to broadcasting – the PWE’s Colonel Nigel Sutton responded enthusiastically, replying that further ‘definition’ on this would be helpful.<sup>39</sup>

Other reports feature striking details of life in German and occupied Europe, the granularity of which appear designed to contribute to the PWE’s rumour and black propaganda campaigns. In his official history of the agency, Garnett noted that ‘the kind of gossip and rumours circulating among Germans hostile to the Hitler regime’ picked up by Wiskemann were ‘of considerable value to our Black propaganda’.<sup>40</sup> Walter Adams, the PWE’s coordinator of propaganda intelligence, similarly observed in May 1942 that Wiskemann’s reports ‘consist chiefly of gossipy items gleaned . . . in conversations, etc. Information of this type proves very useful in black work, but requires extreme caution and expert regional knowledge before it is used as background intelligence or for publicity purposes’.<sup>41</sup> The level of detail is sometimes extreme. One telegram dated 4 February 1943 reported on conditions at an aluminium factory in Wutöschingen, just over Switzerland’s border with Germany. Wiskemann reported the salaries of workers at the factories, the costs of their board and lodging, and gives details of rations provided in the factory canteens. In addition, she noted that a little butter is provided on Fridays and Saturdays, and that workers received ‘Black ersatz coffee early in the morning. Beside this only beer, lemonade and cigarettes can be bought at the canteens’.<sup>42</sup> In previous years she reported that a friend had spoken to a French woman from Toulouse, who observed that a portrait of Marshal Pétain, the leader of Vichy France, has been removed from the wall of her workplace.<sup>43</sup> Another contact reported shortages of darning wool and typewriters; another, coming from Paris, ‘had seen German soldiers there buying books by Thomas Mann’.<sup>44</sup>

John Baker White, one of the PWE agents who sifted through her reports, recalled in his post-war memoir *The Big Lie* (1955) searching for 'intimate little details upon which rumour, deception and morale-breaking are built up'.<sup>45</sup> Wiskemann's correspondence affords a rare glimpse into how these details were sourced in the field. Some of her reports featured gossip about senior Nazis, which appear intended for use in propaganda (often rumours or 'sibs') designed to undermine German trust in political leaders by spreading tales of their luxurious and promiscuous lifestyles, or their mental and physical frailties.<sup>46</sup> A Pilot telegram on 27 November 1942, for example, reported a conversation with a source in contact with a German actor recently returned from the Eastern Front, who had described 'marvellous theatrical shows there, champagne distributed from Hitler, etc.' Another had recently been entertained in the house of the Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, in Berlin and had been 'amazed by [the] luxury in which the whole of Goebbels' family lived. Frau Goebbels ordered present of nescafe [*sic*] to be thrown away because she did not relish it'.<sup>47</sup> The following month Wiskemann reported a conversation with a source who had told her that senior Nazis, Heinrich Himmler and Joachim von Ribbentrop, were both in poor health and frequently disappeared into nursing homes for periods of weeks. Hitler's condition, meanwhile, was said to alternate between 'outbursts of rage and long dazed periods of frightened silence. He has recently been supplied with a certain Fraulein Braun with whom his behaviour is pathologically depraved'.<sup>48</sup>

On at least one occasion Wiskemann relayed intelligence which turned out to be the product of the PWE's own rumour-mongering: in April 1942, she passed on a report that Germans had locked French workmen into a Renault factory at the time of an air raid by the British Royal Air Force and advised that the BBC publicize this cruelty. Colonel Sutton noted that this was in fact 'one of our own sibs which caught on with extraordinary rapidity' – or, he conceded, might have been fabricated 'by like-minded people in Paris'.<sup>49</sup> And just before the shutdown of the PWE's German black radio station *Wehrmachtssender Nord* [translating as 'Wehrmacht Transmitter North'] in early February 1943, it was reported that the station had 'notched a first-class comeback from Miss Wiskemann in Switzerland'. 'Come-backs' were instances where PWE rumours were detected in general circulation, indicating that once again Wiskemann had relayed information which had derived from the agency's own broadcasts.<sup>50</sup>

## Reactions to Wiskemann's reporting

Indicating the extent to which the PWE leadership had direct access to raw intelligence, Wiskemann's reports were circulated at the highest levels of the agency. Many of the Pilot telegrams in the archive are stamped with the following names: Director General R. H. Bruce Lockhart, Deputy Director and head of the military wing Major-General Dallas Brooks, 'PWE Manager in the BBC' Ivone Kirkpatrick, head of the Political Warfare Intelligence Directorate Brigadier Eric Sachs, Director of Plans and Campaigns Peter Ritchie Calder and head of the German Section Richard Crossman. Reactions to her work were often favourable. Balfour noted in August 1942 that the PWE found her work to be of 'great value', and the high esteem in which he held her contributions is



indicated by his later recommendation that she be granted an extra allowance of £400 per annum.<sup>51</sup> A September 1942 note by a Miss Maxwell of the Italian Section observed that 'Miss Wiskemann's contributions are among the more useful pieces of information we receive from secret sources and in view of the dearth of reliable intelligence about Italy, her work may be considered valuable to the Section.'<sup>52</sup> Sachs also appreciated her reports, writing towards the end of 1944 that 'Berne has become an increasingly important centre for intelligence and has continued to produce valuable material. Liaison has been assisted by the re-opening of communications and the visit of hard-pressed Miss Wiskemann.'<sup>53</sup>

Others were more sceptical, however. An anonymously written PWE note from January 1943 casts doubt on intelligence Wiskemann passed on from subversive groups within Germany, observing that these reports 'have referred exclusively to "decent German" groups at a high level, who do not like atrocities and the extremes of Nazi doctrine, and who have good connections in [German] F.O., Church and Army', and suggesting that the communications had been 'allowed if not inspired by the German authorities.'<sup>54</sup> An August 1944 memo by intelligence official Clifton Child dismissed reports from Wiskemann on atrocities committed by Germans in the occupied territories as 'of no earthly use to us', and requested that instead of 'generalisations about morale' the PWE required specific information on topics including the breakdown of police authority and the inequality of hardships suffered by the German people and their leaders.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the PWE's black propaganda supremo Sefton Delmer declared himself unimpressed following a meeting with Wiskemann in November 1944, describing her as 'thoroughly uncollaborative' and 'much too Scarlet Pimpernel-minded for the humdrum needs of mere Black propaganda', suggesting that he found her overly adventurous and conspiratorial.<sup>56</sup> He subsequently requested the appointment of a second PWE representative in Berne, but this was turned down by Bruce Lockhart.<sup>57</sup>

## Eccentric tasks

It is possible that Wiskemann's perceived Pimpernel mindset was encouraged by some of the more demanding and eccentric tasks she was assigned, some of which verged on espionage. Over the course of 1942, for example, the PWE's Balkan Section made a series of curious requests. In March, Wiskemann was asked to get in touch with a Croat Rowing Club in Switzerland. In June, the same section requested details of twenty-one Slovene resistance fighters being tried before a special tribunal in Rome, emphasizing that obtaining the names of some of these figures was 'extremely important for our . . . black work'.<sup>58</sup> In July, she was asked to interview a group of Serb children recently arrived via Italy in Ticino/Tessin in the south of Switzerland.<sup>59</sup> Wiskemann discussed their arrival with a Yugoslav diplomat in Berne and discovered that the children were aged between five and ten, had been sent with the agreement of the Germans by the Serbian puppet regime of Milan Nedić and accordingly were 'probably the least interesting small Serbs one could find'. Since the children were under strict Axis surveillance, Wiskemann arranged that 'certain Yugoslav wives of Swiss people who

naturally visit these children . . . should try to find out for me what they say about their life at home'.<sup>60</sup>

Aside from intelligence gathering, there is evidence to suggest that Wiskemann was also charged with the dissemination of propaganda materials. A letter to Adams towards the end of May 1942 appears to attest to her success in this field; having just received a bag of the Free French cultural and political review *La France Libre* [translating as 'Free France'] and other pamphlets, she reported that she knows of 'at least 4 lots of people who are able to get any number of these things into France and are always begging me to produce more'.<sup>61</sup> An October 1942 memo noted that she had been requesting miniature propaganda for many months for smuggling into France and had developed 'excellent channels' for doing so.<sup>62</sup> Writing to London the same month, Wiskemann requested a regular supply of *La France Libre* and the PWE digest *La Revue de la Presse Libre* ['The Free Press Review']. The French Section's H. A. Paniguan added: 'Not only is she ideally placed to reach the most influential persons connected with Vichy France in Switzerland, not only has she developed suitable channels to get material into Unoccupied France, but we know that whenever she has received material, she has been able to despatch it to Eastern and Central Europe as well'.<sup>63</sup>

## Challenges and problems

Sending material to Wiskemann, particularly on the Lisbon–Berne leg of the journey, was difficult – in part due to Switzerland's complete encirclement by Axis forces following the Nazi occupation of Vichy France in November 1942. Space was also tight in the British diplomatic bag, and PWE material appears to have taken second place to Foreign Office and MoI papers which were seen as more important or respectable. Wiskemann was still receiving copies of *La Revue de la Presse Libre* and *La France Libre* the following April, when it appears material was also being sent for local reproduction as well as distribution.

It appears that the greatest impediments to Wiskemann's work were posed not by hostile enemy actors but by figures within the walls of the Berne Legation. Although she got on well with Kelly and with Arthur 'Boofy' Gore (Lord Arran), Assistant Press Attaché at the legation until his transfer to Lisbon in early 1941, relations with other members of the legation were less than harmonious. It is possible that Wiskemann had a combustible or rebarbative personality – she was reportedly 'on vile terms' with an SOE representative in Berne – but both her memoir and the PWE papers suggest that her gender presented the main problem.<sup>64</sup> The grinding casual sexism experienced by Wiskemann during her wartime career is indicated by her recollection of being vetted by a senior British security official who told her that she was 'not nearly such a fool as he had expected a woman would be'.<sup>65</sup> At the legation in Berne, she felt that for the first time since Cambridge she was 'up against serious resentment of an independent female'.<sup>66</sup> Writing to Bruce Lockhart in August 1942, she complained of a 'fresh outburst of misogyny' at the legation and asked him to 'have a word' with Minister of Information Brendan Bracken.<sup>67</sup> Although Wiskemann's gender very

likely assisted her in some contexts to gather information without raising suspicions, it appears to have prevented her from being given a better-defined operational role in disseminating black propaganda. In March 1942, the PWE discussed sending an official representative to Switzerland, outside the auspices of the MoI, who would disseminate rumours through Swiss newspapers or by word of mouth 'in conversation with Swiss business men' and would undertake the production and dissemination of 'subversive literature'. The memo further suggested that this putative agent – significantly imagined using male pronouns – could move in less-elevated 'working-class' social circles to Wiskemann.<sup>68</sup> The appointment was never made, however. Wiskemann appears to have posed challenges to two intersecting fields – diplomacy and intelligence – which proved notoriously hostile to women until the later decades of the twentieth century.

The other main problem Wiskemann faced was that of overwork. She recalled in her memoir that at the time of her reappointment it had been 'vaguely presumed that I could find assistants in Switzerland'.<sup>69</sup> Before returning to Switzerland, she wrote to Leeper in August 1941 that she worried about how to do everything that Woburn had asked for since she had been given enough work for 'a team of 10 of me'; the following month she suggested she had been assigned duties suitable for twenty.<sup>70</sup> These problems appear to have continued for the duration of Wiskemann's posting, and the files feature repeated requests for assistance. In September 1944, she reported that she had been 'overworking for three years, practically without leave'.<sup>71</sup> Despite these pressures, towards the end of the war she appears to have harboured some hopes of continuing in the field: just prior to VE Day, she wrote to London noting that the US Office of War Information representatives in Berne were 'full of plans for carrying on here' and asked whether there were any similar plans for the British to maintain an operation in Switzerland.<sup>72</sup> There were not, and Wiskemann left Switzerland to return to London on 26 June 1945.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

Garnett's confident assertion that Wiskemann was 'unaware of the extent and nature of PWE Black propaganda and of the way in which much of her material was used' suggests that the gendered nature of covert wartime service has been recapitulated in its historiography: given her numerous contacts in various branches and at all levels of the PWE, it is difficult to believe that she was completely in the dark about these activities, and as we have seen, references to rumours specifically feature repeatedly in her reports to London.<sup>74</sup> If Wiskemann's wartime career points to the chauvinism in the fields of intelligence and diplomacy at this time, it also presents an intriguing picture of the type and extent of work carried out by PWE field officers in neutral countries and shows how the gossip on which black propaganda campaigns – and specifically rumours or 'sibs' – depended was sourced. Finally, her activities highlight the value of neutral Switzerland as a staging post in the wartime exchange of information and disinformation.

## Notes

- 1 The UK National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office files (hereafter FO) 898/256, David V. Kelly to H.L. d'A. Hopkinson, 16 April 1941. The files of the Political Warfare Executive are held at the UK National Archives in the FO 898 series; most of the files referred to in this chapter have been digitized by Gale for the "Archives Unbound" database. Available online: <https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/archives-unbound> (accessed 27 April 2022). For more on the transitions from EH to SO1 to the PWE, see David Garnett, *The Secret History of PWE: The Political Warfare Executive 1939–1945* (London: St Ermin's Press, 2002), 1–73.
- 2 Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Europe I Saw* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 141.
- 3 Geoffrey Field, 'Elizabeth Wiskemann, Scholar-Journalist, and the Study of International Relations', in *Women's International Thought: A New History*, ed. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 206.
- 4 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 18.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 TNA, FO 898/256, Kelly to Hopkinson, 16 April 1941.
- 10 TNA, FO 898/256, Anon to Stevens, 11 August 1941.
- 11 TNA, FO 898/256, Kelly to Hopkinson, 16 April 1941; Wiskemann, *Europe*, 141.
- 12 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 147.
- 13 TNA, FO 898/256, telegram from Elizabeth Wiskemann, 12 February 1941.
- 14 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 153.
- 15 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Rex Leeper, 19 August 1941.
- 16 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 155.
- 17 TNA, FO 898/256, telegram from Sir R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 23 April 1941; TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Thomas Barman, 25 April 1941; Nigel West notes that Winsor was 'a key figure in the local SIS station and formerly a member of the pre-war SIS station in Zurich', see Nigel West, *Historical Dictionary of British Intelligence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 419.
- 18 TNA, FO 898/256, memo by H.V., 25 April 1941.
- 19 TNA, FO 898/256, Anon to Walter Adams, n.d.
- 20 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Barman, 25 April 1941.
- 21 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Leeper, 23 June 1941.
- 22 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to R. H. Bruce Lockhart, 4 August 1941; Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 140.
- 23 TNA, FO 898/256, Leeper to Walter Stewart Roberts, 29 August 1941.
- 24 TNA, FO 898/256, Michael Balfour to P. W. S. Y. Scarlett, 13 August 1941.
- 25 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Nigel Sutton, 21 October 1941.
- 26 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 157.
- 27 TNA, FO 898/256, Balfour to Gage, 12 September 1942.
- 28 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Balfour, 28 October 1942.
- 29 TNA, FO 371/34873, Foreign Office minute, 'Switzerland: Position of Miss Wiskemann', 11 January 1943.
- 30 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 161.

- 31 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Sutton, 26 October 1941.
- 32 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 159.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 TNA, FO 898/256, Berne to Foreign Office, 1 December 1942, 3 December 1942, 5 December 1942 and 9 December 1942.
- 35 TNA, FO 898/256, Berne to Foreign Office, 4 December 1942.
- 36 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 171.
- 37 TNA, FO 898/256, Anon to Hubert Howard, 16 September 1942.
- 38 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Balfour, 26 August 1942.
- 39 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Sutton, 21 October 1941; Sutton to Wiskemann, 4 November 1941.
- 40 Garnett, *PWE*, 142.
- 41 TNA, FO 898/256, Adams to Ivone Kirkpatrick, 11 May 1942.
- 42 TNA, FO 371/34382, telegram from Berne to Foreign Office, 4 February 1943.
- 43 TNA, FO 898/256, note by Wiskemann, 8 August 1942.
- 44 TNA, FO 898/256, note by Wiskemann, 29 October 1941.
- 45 John Baker White, *The Big Lie* (London: Evans Brothers, 1955), 105. Correspondence from November 1942 indicates that Baker White was also involved in sending propaganda material to Wiskemann for distribution. See TNA, FO 898/256, memo from Baker White to G.S.O. (Country), 2 November 1942.
- 46 The word derives from the Latin *sibillare*, meaning to hiss or whisper. See Sefton Delmer, *Black Boomerang: An Autobiography: Volume Two* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962), 66.
- 47 TNA, FO 898/256, Berne to Foreign Office, 27 November 1942.
- 48 TNA, FO 898/256, Berne to Foreign Office, 19 December 1942.
- 49 TNA, FO 898/256, Sutton to Adams, 25 April 1942.
- 50 TNA, FO 898/108, 'Notes on German Black', n.d.
- 51 TNA, FO 898/256, Balfour to Scarlett, 13 August 1942; TNA, FO 898/256, Balfour to J. Arrow, 21 October 1942.
- 52 TNA, FO 898/256, Miss Maxwell to Balfour, 15 September 1942.
- 53 TNA, FO 898/35, 'P.W.I. Directorate: Report for 1944', 20 January 1944.
- 54 TNA, FO 898/108, 'Reply to Points Raised in David Bowes Lyon's Letter of 21st January', n.d.
- 55 TNA, FO 898/257, Clifton Child to Lt. Col. Kerr, 12 August 1944.
- 56 TNA, FO 898/257, Delmer to Kerr, 11 December 1944. A handwritten note by Kerr casts doubt on the severity of his judgement, however, describing it as a 'slice of vitriol'. See TNA, FO 898/257, note signed by Kerr, 16 December 1944.
- 57 TNA, FO 898/61, minutes of PWE (Enemy & Satellite) 'Black' meeting, 16 November 1944.
- 58 TNA, FO 898/256, Adams to Scarlett, 25 June 1942.
- 59 TNA, FO 898/256, MoI to Berne, 11 July 1942.
- 60 TNA, FO 898/256, 'Extract from Letter of August 11th, 1942, from Miss Wiskemann to Mr. Roberts'.
- 61 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Adams, 29 May 1942.
- 62 TNA, FO 898/256, David Alexander to H. A. Paniguan, 21 October 1942.
- 63 TNA, FO 898/256, Paniguan to Scarlett, 22 October 1942.
- 64 TNA, FO 898/256, Balfour to Scarlett, 13 August 1942.
- 65 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 140.
- 66 Ibid., 141-2.

- 67 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to R. H. Bruce Lockhart, 4 August 1941.
- 68 TNA, FO 898/256, 'Memorandum on Work to be Performed for P.W.E. in Switzerland', n.d.
- 69 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 157.
- 70 TNA, FO 898/256, Wiskemann to Leeper, 19 August 1941; Wiskemann to Leeper, [obscured] September 1941.
- 71 TNA, FO 898/257, Wiskemann to 'the General Secretary P.W.E.', 21 September 1944.
- 72 TNA, FO 898/257, Wiskemann to Kerr, 5 May 1945.
- 73 Wiskemann, *Europe*, 203.
- 74 Garnett, *PWE*, 142.