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he paranoid fantasy behind Brexit

In the dark imagination of English reactionaries, Britain is always a defeated nation - and the EU is the imaginary invader

by Fintan O'Toole

Main image: Illustration: Francesco Ciccolella

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Before the narrative of Len Deighton's bestselling thriller SS-GB begins, there is a "reproduction" of an authentic-looking rubber-stamped document: "Instrument of Surrender - English Text. Of all British armed forces in United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland including all islands." It is dated 18 February 1941. After ordering the cessation of all hostilities by British forces, it sets down further conditions, including "the British Command to carry out at once, without argument or comment, all further orders that will be issued by the German Command on any subject. Disobedience of orders, or failure to comply with them, will be regarded as a breach of these surrender terms and will be dealt with by the German Command in accordance with the laws and usages of war."

Written amid the anxieties of Britain's early membership of the European Communities and published in 1978, Deighton's thriller sets up two ideas that will become important in the rhetoric of Brexit. Since there is no sense that Deighton has a conscious anti-EU agenda, the idea seems to arise from a deeper structure of feeling in England. One is the fear of the Englishman turning into the "new European", fitting himself into the structures of German domination. His central character is a harbinger of the "rootless cosmopolitan" who cannot be trusted to uphold English independence and English values, and who therefore functions as the enemy within, the quisling class of pro-Europeans. This is the treason of the elite, the puppet politicians and sleek mandarins who quickly accommodate themselves to the new regime.

Deighton was building on real historical memories of the appeasers whose prewar conduct makes the notion that they would have quickly become collaborators in the event of a defeat to the Nazis highly credible. This idea of a treacherous elite would later ferment into a heady and intoxicating brew of suspicion that the Brexiteers would both dispense to the masses and consume themselves. (In 2014, the BBC announced plans for a five-part TV version, which was screened in 2017, shortly after Brexit.)



The 2017 BBC TV adaptation of Len Deighton's SS-GB.
Photograph: BBC/Sid Gentle Films/Laurie Sparham

The other crucial idea here is the vertiginous fall from "heart of Empire" to "occupied colony". In the imperial imagination, there are only two states: dominant and submissive, coloniser and colonised. This dualism lingers. If England is not an imperial power, it must be the only other thing it can be: a colony. And, as Deighton successfully demonstrated, this logic can be founded in an alternative English history. The moment of greatest triumph - the defeat of the Nazis - can be reimagined as the moment of greatest humiliation - defeat by the Nazis. The pain of colonisation and defeat can, in the context of uneasy membership of the EU, be imaginatively appropriated. (Boris Johnson, in the Telegraph of 12 November, claimed that "we are on the verge of signing up for something even worse than the current constitutional position. These are the terms that might be enforced on a colony.")

SS-GB was in part the inspiration for an even more successful English thriller, Robert Harris's multimillion-selling *Fatherland*, published in 1992 and filmed for television in 1994. Harris had begun the novel in the mid-1980s but abandoned it. He revived and finished it explicitly in the context of German reunification in 1990 and of fears that the enemy Britain had defeated twice in the 20th century would end the century

by dominating it: “If,” Harris wrote in the introduction to the 20th anniversary edition in 2012, “there was one factor that suddenly gave my fantasy of a united Germany a harder edge, it was the news that exactly such an entity was unexpectedly returning to the heart of Europe.”

In retrospect, German reunification is perhaps the greatest missed opportunity for the English finally to have done with the war. Had there been a capacity to generate new narratives of Europe, this could have been shaped as a moment of British vindication - the final working-out of the consequences of nazism. As Anthony Barnett puts it, “the triumph and relief of the unification of Germany could and should have belonged to us in Britain, as well as to Germany itself. It was the final liberation from nazism, the end of that country’s punishment, a time to welcome a great culture back into our arms.”

Why, then, were there no photographs of Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl holding hands at the Brandenburg Gate to match the pictures of Kohl and François Mitterrand at Verdun in 1984? Because Thatcher literally carried in her handbag maps showing German expansion under the Nazis. This was a mental cartography that English conservatism could not transcend - the map of a Europe that may no longer exist in reality, but within which its imagination remains imprisoned. “Europe,” Barnett writes, “moved on from the second world war and Britain didn’t.” One might go so far as to say that England never got over winning the war.

In fact, Britain not only did not move on in 1990 - with the resurrection of a united Germany, it moved back. Harris is no anti-European reactionary and would become one of the most furious critics of Brexit. Yet, like Deighton, he was tapping into profound national anxieties.



French president François Mitterrand (left) and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl commemorating the victims of the world wars in Verdun, France, in 1984. Photograph: Marcel Mochet/AFP/Getty Images

The real twist of the knife in Harris’s story is that the novel is set in Germany and the main characters are German. There is nothing of significance to say about England 20 years after its surrender. Except, that is, that is part of a European Union: “In the west, 12 nations - Portugal, Spain, France, Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland - had been corralled by Germany, under the Treaty of Rome, into a European trading bloc. German was the official second language in all schools. People drove German cars, listened to German radios,

watched German televisions, worked in German-owned factories, moaned about the behaviour of German tourists in German-dominated holiday resorts, while German teams won every international sporting competition except cricket, which only the English played.”



A dystopian fantasy this may be, but in the English reactionary imagination, dystopian fantasy was and is indistinguishable from reality. Rhetorically, it was commonplace among British anti-Europeans that the EU was a continuation in another, more insidious form, of previous attempts at domination from the continent. In 1989, for example, the Bruges Group of anti-European Tories heard Prof Kenneth Minogue of the London School of Economics tell them that “the European institutions were attempting to create a European Union, in the tradition of the mediaeval popes, Charlemagne, Napoleon, the Kaiser and Adolf Hitler”.

The sleight of hand was not subtle: Hitler tried to unite Europe, so does the EU, therefore the EU is a Hitlerian project. But the lack of subtlety did not stop the trope from being used in the Brexit campaign: “Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this [unifying Europe], and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods,” Boris Johnson told the Telegraph on 14 May 2016, a month before the referendum. That Napoleon and “various people” were not the point of the argument became clear in Johnson’s reiteration of the real point: that the EU was “pursuing a similar goal to Hitler in trying to create a powerful superstate”. While Harris was writing *Fatherland* in 1990, the British secretary of state for trade and industry, Nicholas Ridley, a close friend and ally of the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, told the *Spectator* that the European monetary system being introduced by the EU was “all a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe ... I’m not against giving up sovereignty in



Illustration: Francesco Ciccolella

principle, but not to this lot. You might as well give it to Adolf Hitler, frankly ... I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have the shelters and the chance to fight back than simply being taken over by economics."

The cover of that issue of the Spectator's bore the headline "Speaking for England" - a conscious reference to one of the moments of high drama in September 1939 when Leo Amery in the House of Commons invited Labour's Arthur Greenwood to "Speak for England!", implying that the appeasing prime minister Neville Chamberlain did not do so.

Ridley's remarks were dismissed by Lutz Stavenhagen, minister of state in the German foreign office, as the sort of thing that might be heard "in the pub after a football match". And Ridley himself had to resign. But these were not the mere rantings of a marginal crank. As Peter Jenkins wrote in the Independent at the time, "it is widely supposed that Mrs Thatcher's heart is with him, if not her head ... It is no secret that she, like him, fears that monetary and economic union in Europe will become the tool of German domination rather than the means of containing a united Germany. She too instinctively mistrusts the Germans and finds it impossible to forget the experiences of the second world

war."

Thatcher had the Falklands war. It may have been a last hurrah for Britain's imperial pretensions, but it functioned even better as a kind of epilogue to the great psychodrama of the second world war and a real-life version of the invasion thrillers. In her victory speech of July 1982, Thatcher was quite explicit in invoking the Falklands as a renaissance of the old wartime spirit, and victory as proof that Britain was no different then from what it had been during its Finest Hour. She chided those who believed that "we could never again be what we were". The doubters "were wrong. The lesson of the Falklands is that Britain has not changed and that this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history. This generation can match their fathers and grandfathers in ability, in courage, and in resolution. We have not

changed. When the demands of war and the dangers to our own people call us to arms - then we British are as we have always been.”

Yet even in this triumphal mode, Thatcher gave new life to the metaphors of retreat and invasion. “We have ceased to be a nation in retreat,” she said, implying that the nation had been precisely that for a long time. “Why,” she asked, “do we have to be invaded before we throw aside our selfish aims and begin to work together ... ?”

Within this question is a claim: “we” were invaded. The beauty of the Falklands conflict is that it played out the invasion fantasy of SS-GB - a fascist regime violating the sanctity of the homeland - but at a safe distance of almost 8,000 miles. The tiny population of the Falklands - 1,820 people in 1982 - served as a metaphor for the UK. “British people,” said Thatcher, “had to be threatened by foreign soldiers and British territory invaded and then - why then - the response was incomparable.” What had not happened in 1939-45 had finally happened in 1982.



Margaret Thatcher visiting British troops in the Falkland Islands in 1983. Photograph: PA

It helped that the tiny Falklands population that was serving this microcosmic function was almost entirely white - a “British people” that no longer existed - and that this “British territory” was an almost entirely rural landscape. The Falklands was a kind of make-believe England with no black and brown immigrants. Its pre-industrial terrain was a fantasy version of the post-industrial landscape that Thatcher herself was in fact creating at home in England, without the empty steel plants and rusting machines.

It was not just war that was needed to reassure Britain that it had a meaningful collective existence, it was the idea of invasion and submission.

There could be no release from the dark fantasies haunting the imagination of British conservatism, and there would continue to be a need for an imaginary invader and dominator. In 1990, while Germany was being reunified, there was very little depth to anti-German feeling in Britain - surveys at the time showed that most British people were in favour of German unity and trusted the Germans a lot or somewhat. The imagining of a German-dominated Europe through the evocation of Hitler was not an authentic popular prejudice against an old enemy. It was a way - albeit one that still seemed to have few real-world consequences - of thinking about the European Union

itself, of summoning it into being as the ghastly ghost, not just of the Nazis, but of Nazis who had in reality won the war.

The war imagery filled a hole. England had no deep imaginative commitment to the European project. As an idea, the EU had a distinctly weak grip on English allegiance. It was always understood by most people as a more or less grudging concession to reality, a matter for resigned acceptance rather than joyous embrace. The popular mood a year after Britain joined was nicely captured by an official at the Department of Trade and Industry, who likened the British public to “a crowd of holidaymakers who, after much doubt and expense, have made a dangerous journey only to find the climate chilly, the hotel not what it was cracked up to be and the food too expensive ... bloodthirsty feelings are mounting, not only towards the other nationalities in the hotel but to the courier who got them there.”

The sheer volatility of public opinion in Britain was clear in the 1975 referendum on whether or not to stay in the common market: between January and June 1975, Harold Wilson’s government managed to turn a 57% leave preference in polls to a 67% remain vote on the day. The referendum was “the only really sustained debate the British had ever had on their role in the world” and, as the Daily Express put it, in a jubilant editorial: “Britain’s Yes to Europe” had rung “louder, clearer and more unanimous than any decision in peacetime history”.

Yet a result that seemed both decisive and conclusive proved to be neither - Europe continued to poison British politics. And perhaps one of the reasons it did so is that, as the 1975 referendum campaign showed, there was a very deep underlying division about the meaning of the second world war. The war was - and remains - crucial in structuring English feeling about the European Union. In 1975, many of the leading advocates on both sides were veterans, as were many voters. But instead of this common experience creating a common emotional ideal of Britain’s relationship to Europe, it fed two completely opposite stories, each very deeply felt.

One of these stories was that the catastrophic experience of the first half of the 20th century carried two lessons that must never be forgotten: unrestrained nationalism led to war, and Britain could not stand aside from the fate of Europe. As the historian Robert Saunders has shown, the successful pro-European campaigners in 1975 were both highly explicit and highly emotive in making these connections. For them, “the emphasis was on the horror of war, which had devoured millions of lives in the prosecution of national rivalries. Britain in Europe used the poppy, the flower of remembrance, in its literature, while its logo was a dove of peace.” Pro-Europe posters said “Nationalism kills” and “No more Civil Wars”. Another, published for the anniversary of victory in Europe, directly evoked the joy of that triumph and sought to channel it into a sense that the common market was the great reward for victory: “On VE Day we celebrated the beginnings of peace. Vote Yes to make sure we keep it.” Another poster read simply: “Forty million people died in two European wars this century. Better lose a little sovereignty than a son or daughter.”



Barbara Castle (left), then a minister in the Labour government, campaigning for Britain to leave the Common Market, in 1975. Photograph: Keystone/Getty Images

These appeals worked for the majority of voters, but this very mention of sovereignty opened up, for a significant minority, a gaping wound. “For some,” wrote Saunders, “the surrender of national sovereignty to the EEC was a betrayal of all those who had fought and died ‘to deliver Europe from Nazi dictatorship’.” A woman from Bournemouth wrote to the anti-EEC Labour minister Barbara Castle that “I ... did not fight and suffer a war for six years to be dictated to by the Germans.” “Hitler’s ghost,” wrote another of Castle’s correspondents, “must be shaking with laughter at Roy Jenkins, Hattersley & the rest of the traitor crew.” Some, Saunders writes, “viewed the Community as a new power-grab by Germany, a country which ‘on two occasions ... has failed to conquer the British militarily’”. For Castle’s correspondents, the notion “that the GERMANS love us any more today than they did in 1914 & 1939” was dismissed with contempt. “The leopard does not easily change its spots.”

What’s striking is that we can begin to see in this hysterical rhetoric the outlines of two notions that would become crucial to Brexit discourse. One is the comparison of pro-European Brits to quislings, collaborators, appeasers and traitors. The leave campaign in 1975 likened the treaty of accession to the Munich agreement of 1938, remembered as a shameful act of surrender to the Germans. Christopher Frere-Smith, who ran the Get Britain Out campaign, warned repeatedly that accession to the common market marked a “new Munich”, with Ted Heath and Roy Jenkins (who was leading the in campaign) playing the roles of Neville Chamberlain and his foreign secretary Lord Halifax. Voters were warned not be “fooled by the press bosses and the establishment politicians. They were wrong about Hitler and they’re wrong again.”

But the other idea is the fever-dream of an English Resistance, and its weird corollary: a desire to have actually been invaded so that one could – gloriously – resist. And not just resist but, in the ultimate apotheosis of masochism, die. Part of the allure of romantic anti-imperial nationalism is martyrdom. The executed leaders of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, for example, stand as resonant examples of the potency of the myth of blood sacrifice. But in the ironic reversal of zombie imperialism, the appropriation of the imagery of resistance to a former colonising power, this romance of martyrdom is mobilized as defiance of the EU.

in his anguished complaint about the vitiating effects of membership of the common market in 1977, Enoch Powell lamented: “The breath which

I condemn submission to laws this nation has not made condemn submission to scales of value which this nation had not willed. To both sorts of submission I ascribe the haunting fear, which I am sure I am not alone in feeling, that we, the British, will soon have nothing left to die for. That was not a slip of the tongue. What a man lives for is what a man dies for, because every bit of living is a bit of dying. Patriotism is to have a nation to die for, and to be glad to die for it - all the days of one's life." This takes martyrdom to new levels of self-annihilating fantasy: death in the anti-EU resistance is not a fate or even an act. It is a daily pleasure.

The anti-Europe campaign in 1975 very consciously evoked the language of wartime resistance. The Common Market Safeguards Campaign published a newspaper called Resistance News, and the group of MPs around the leading Tory leaver, Neil Marten, was known as the "R" Group - R for resistance. During the war, Marten had been dropped into both France and Norway to work with the resistance movements, so presumably his followers could think of themselves operating behind enemy lines in deepest Dorset. All of this is much more 'Allo, 'Allo! than Army of Shadows - tragedy played out the second time as farce. But, in what would become the camp sitcom of Brexit, that would not diminish its force.



Boris Johnson in Slovakia in September 2017. Photograph: Jakub Gavlaák/EPA

Europe's role in this weird psychodrama is entirely pre-scripted. It does not greatly matter what the European Union is or what it is doing - its function in the plot is to be a more insidious form of nazism. This is important to grasp, because one of the key arguments in mainstream pro-Brexit political and journalistic discourse would be that Britain had to leave because the Europe it had joined was not the Europe it found itself part of in 2016. In Andrew Gilligan's formulation on the 40th anniversary of British accession in the Telegraph in 2012, "the British people joined, and were happy to join, a common market. They did not sign up to a social chapter, a single currency or any moves down the road to a superstate." Or as Boris Johnson put it in September 2017, the "post-imperial future" was "sold to the people purely as a common market, a way of maximising trade". But "then came the gradual realisation that this was a very different agenda, an attempt not just at economic but political integration of a kind that the British people had never bargained for." In itself, this is no more than usually mendacious - the truth being that "ever closer union" was always an explicit part of what the British signed up to in 1973 and voted for in 1975.

What matters, though, is the way it misses the point. The idea of Europe as a soft-Nazi superstate was vividly present in 1975, even when the still-emerging EU had a much weaker, less evolved and less intrusive form. The imaginary existential struggle between the gallant English Resistance and the Euroreich was already being played out in one part of English consciousness. It was not a product of the ways in which the nine-member Common Market became the 28-member European Union. It was a product of England's deeply divided and strangely unsettled relationship to the second world war and what it meant.

Yet what brings these disparate modes together is the lure of self-pity, the weird need to dream England into a state of awful oppression. If we return to Nicholas Ridley's rant, the striking thing is the way it wishes Britain back into wartime: "I'd rather have the shelters and the chance to fight back." This suggests that what Britain was experiencing in the 1990s at the hands of the EU was actually worse than the war of 1939-45 in which it triumphed. And what could be worse than winning the war? Only losing it. Ridley's conjuring of the EU as a "German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe" evokes a worse kind invasion than that in Deighton's SS-GB: invasion by stealth. The suggestion is that a physical invasion by the Nazis would have been preferable to the membership of the EU which achieved the same ends by more cunning and dishonourable means. At least the Nazis could have been, in Churchill's great and galvanic rhetoric, fought on the beaches, hills, fields and streets. They offered the "chance to fight back".

The new German invasion, cloaked in the guise of peaceful cooperation, is more damnable because it does not give the English Resistance a proper physical target. Hostility to the EU thus opens the way to a bizarre logic in which a Nazi invasion would have been, relatively speaking, welcome. This is a deeply strange kind of displacement - a victor learning to think like the vanquished. But it makes a kind of sense. On the one hand, as the white paper on entry to the common market emphasised in 1971, the experience of not being invaded was one of the genuinely distinctive things about being British: "Our physical assets and our economy had suffered less disastrously than those of other western European countries as a result of the war: nor did we suffer the shock of invasion. We were thus less immediately conscious of the need for us to become part of the unity in Europe."

Yet the paper went on to contrast the fate of Britain since the war with that of the six members of the existing common market, all of whom had been invaded: "The contrast between their experiences in recent years as members of the Communities, and ours outside, when our resources have not been growing sufficiently to do all we should like to do at home and abroad, suggests that they chose the right road ... All the Community countries enjoyed rates of growth of gross national product (GNP) per head of population, or of private consumption per head, roughly twice as great as Britain's." It was not entirely ridiculous at some subliminal level to see these two things - being invaded and growing twice as fast as the country that wasn't - as cause and effect. The "right road" to prosperity did not seem to lie through successful self-defence - on the contrary, invasion worked well for the six.

Britain was genuinely in a topsy-turvy situation, the winner that had been surpassed by the losers. Why not draw a topsy-turvy conclusion: in a dark stratum of the reactionary mind, we must think of ourselves as a defeated nation? And if Britain was to be defeated, the EU must be its invasive oppressor. Must be, because there was no other possible candidate. The very absurdity of this notion was its strength. The paranoiac must at some stage ask himself: but why are they out to get me? Since there was no actual evidence of any western European hostility, the answer must lie in some deeply hidden motivation. How could they hate us when we saved them in the war? The proto-Brexiteers came up with a counter-factual truth that was at the same time highly satisfying: they hate us because we saved them.

Since the English mood in relation to joining Europe was largely one of surrendering to necessity, it was not so hard to think of the act as surrender full stop. In the literary journal *Encounter's* 1971 symposium on whether the UK should join the common market, for example, Sir William Hayter, warden of New College, Oxford, and former British ambassador to Moscow, looked back on his contribution to its debates almost a decade earlier: "in 1962 I wrote that 'in a few years we shall have to make an unconditional surrender to get in'. I am afraid those few years have gone by, and now it is not even certain that an unconditional surrender will get us in." Peter Shore MP, the most persistent Labour party critic of Europe, during the 1975 referendum took up this theme: "What the advocates of membership are saying ... is that we are finished as a country; that the long and famous story of the British nation and people has ended; that we are now so weak and powerless that we must accept terms and conditions, penalties and limitations almost as though we had suffered defeat in a war." It was a masochistic rhetoric that would return in full force as the Brexit negotiations failed to produce the promised miracles.

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