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The paranoid fantasy behind Brexit

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

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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.