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CONTEMPORARY COMMENT: DON'T MENTION THE WAR!

MEIC PEARSE

Basil Fawlty couldn't forbear 'mentioning' the Second World War when confronted with visitors from Germany. As with so much humour, what was funny about his antics was that they were just an exaggerated version of real life; anti-German sentiment, often thinly masked in humour, is nowhere more alive and well in the European Union of the 1990s than in Britain.

A German student came to stay with our family recently, and she accompanied us on a weekend trip away visiting friends. As soon as he met her, one older person (but not old enough to have fought in the war) started reminiscing about the bombing of his home-town (and, just to be polite, what he remembered hearing of hers). He later launched into a political speech about the dangers of nationalism and how it always leads to fighting (very tactfully, he used the example of modern ex-Yugoslavia!) Then we all settled down to see a video of an old film: it was *Chitty-chitty Bang-bang*. The film is set early in the century and is a fairy-tale fantasy, but the baddies, who come from 'Vulgaria' and lock up or kill children, are clearly Germans: the castle is familiar from Bavarian holiday brochures, the men wear Lederhosen, speak with German accents and use phrases such as 'Komm, Herr Potts'. Their behaviour is obviously borrowed from all the clichés of the Gestapo and camp commandants so familiar from the war films. After the video came the news: a nasty diplomatic to-do about D-Day celebrations. We have no TV in our own home; nevertheless, our children later explained to our German guest the story of one of their favourite films from the few they have seen—it was *The Sound of Music*. Our friend did not come with us to the church meeting the following morning, or she would have been treated to a lengthy sermon illustration about Nazi concentration camps. All of these trivial events might, apart from the presence of a German guest, have taken place almost any weekend in any British family.

And I am not objecting to any of them—only to their nauseating frequency, which reveals a totally unhealthy national obsession. Most of us are obsessed by an event that three-quarters of us cannot remember. Isn't it about time we stopped harping on about it?

I. A HORRIFYING HISTORY

But how, many will ask, can I possibly say such a thing? If the Second World War hadn't been fought and won, we wouldn't be here; at least, not in any kind of society worth living in. For those British people who did live through the war, and to whom we owe so much, it was the central, and often the defining, event in their lives. For many, their lives consist of a 'before' and an 'after'. In any case, the Nazi régime was guilty of the worst crimes in history. Six million Jews—men, women and children—were unspeakably put to death. The Soviet Union lost twenty million dead. Civilian massacres on a huge scale were the order of the day in occupied Poland and Russia, and such atrocities occurred frequently elsewhere. These are mind-numbing horrors; we can repeat the statistics, but perhaps never truly grasp the scale of suffering that they represent. Whatever horrible events may happen in the future, historians will always point back to these as the father and mother of them all.

Surely no Christian could condone the downplaying of sin, especially on such an enormous scale? In any case, although the concentration camps were kept a secret, so that few Germans actually *knew* what was happening, the majority had a general idea that something very nasty was going on, and simply preferred not to know. Surely there was a large amount of German guilt? Not only this, but the war created the post-war world of East-West confrontation, and now, with the end of that, we ourselves are facing the re-emergence of the old scores and grudges in eastern Europe which communism suppressed but could not eradicate.

In the light of all this, aren't my criticisms just another example of the post-war generation trampling on the sensitivities of their elders, and thinking they're being clever—even 'intellectual'—for doing so? As I hope to show, little of what I have to say is directed at my elders but, by and large, at my peers. The French, the Dutch, the Belgians, the Danes and Norwegians were all occupied by the Germans, and suffered proportionately far worse than Britain did, but the Second World War—and anti-German sentiment—doesn't remain the national fixation for them that it does for the British. (Perhaps I ought to add here 'and for the Americans as well'; a colleague who is in a position to know informs—or reminds—me that attitudes there are just as bad. A lot of those films I mentioned were, of course, Hollywood productions!) As a history teacher in schools, I got fed up with pupils who, although they knew almost nothing else about the past before I got my hands on them, knew that 'we' (I kept remarking that they must be older than they looked!) won the war, and that Germans in general were a bad lot, and always would be.

II. GOD'S LITTLE ENGLAND?

This attitude exists in churches as well but, like most prejudices acquired by Christians from their secular environments, it is, of course, spiritualised. Around the time of the Maastricht debate, I found people praying against the treaty, because it entailed loss of British (or perhaps they said English, I can't remember!) sovereignty. And the same prayers reminded us that it was British sovereignty, rather than the lower priorities of opposition to mass-murder and megalomaniac tyranny, which was apparently the cause that God was owning at Dunkirk in 1940!

British nationalism has long been cloaked in spiritual garb. John Foxe started it in the 1560s with his *Book of Martyrs*, in which most of the martyrs for Christ whose histories he chose to recount were English, and in which God was particularly interested in England as a bastion of godliness. He saw Queen Elizabeth as a modern Deborah from the Book of Judges; later Puritans often saw the English monarchs as destined to galvanise the Protestants of Europe, under English leadership, in a crusade against the papal Antichrist. Foxe cannot be dismissed as a crank; his book was more widely read in England than any other book than the Bible, and helped define, into relatively modern times, English attitudes towards Catholicism, politics and—what is more to our purpose here—towards foreigners and their own country.

This picture of England, and then later, by extension, Britain, as a sort of latter-day Israel, has never disappeared since. The self-image was helped along enormously in the nineteenth century, when the high-tide of evangelical influence in Britain coincided with the height of Britain's world-domination. (Presumably the sovereignty of African and Asian nations didn't count so much with God?) The attitude is epitomised in the notorious Victorian hymn 'Jerusalem'. Its opening lines ask the question, 'And did those feet in ancient times walk upon England's mountains green?', to which the correct theological answer is a resounding 'No!' But if one is thinking this way, then Britain's supposedly special place in God's heart must be the reason that the sceptred isle alone did not succumb to the Nazis, whilst the rest of Europe did. Not only did Nazi Germany give the nastiest jolt to 'God's chosen nation', certainly since Napoleon, and possibly since the Armada, but the Jews were amongst its principal victims, and these are people in whom Christians have understandably had an important interest. Christians are rightly traditionalist on moral questions, but traditionalism can become a habit of mind, incorporating non-moral issues, such as hankering after the 'great days of Empire'. British Christians' echoing of the national fixation with 'the war', then, has seemed perfectly consistent with 'being spiritual'.

Whatever one's views about God's purposes for the Jews, the national self-image cultivated by *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and nineteenth-century empire-builders is unbiblical. God does indeed have a special nation, in whom he is particularly interested, but it is not Britain. The nation in question is described in 1 Peter 2:9–10: the church is 'a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.' In that church, distinctions of class, sex and race are done away with.

III. ANTI-GERMANISM LEADS WHERE?

The Nazi régime was founded on racism of the very worst type. It is this and its consequences for which all the German people of that period who supported it, whether actively or tacitly, stood condemned. But the anti-German sentiments in Britain which continue to drag up the Second World War are themselves racist. Today the youngest German to have voted for Hitler is well into his or her eighties. The youngest German to have fought in the war (apart from the poor twelve-year-old boys who had guns stuffed into their hands at the defence of Berlin in 1945) is now nearing seventy. Anyone younger than that remembers the war only as a frightened infant in an air-raid shelter, and no one under fifty experienced even this. The continuing suspicion of Germany seems increasingly ridiculous.

But surely Germany is in the process of dominating Europe? Its industry has been frighteningly successful, its currency is the mainstay of the European economy, and even our big 'little brother', the USA, is more interested in German reactions to world affairs than it is to ours. Aren't we about to be overwhelmed by Germany all over again? (And isn't this a good excuse to be quite unnecessarily obstructive on all European questions?)

Well, what are the alternatives? Germany is the biggest nation in Europe outside of Russia. It is located in the very centre, and is bound to be at the centre of affairs. It has eighty million people, more than any other country except Russia. Its economy dwarfs every other. Whether the European Union grows closer together, or whether it falls apart entirely, Europe will be dominated economically by Germany. Does this mean the future is frightening? Only if one takes a racist view of the incorrigibility of Germans. Anyway, what is the alternative? We could nuke it, I suppose. Any Christian takers for that? (If this seems too shocking a way of making this point, just pause to consider: *what*, apart from nurturing hatred disguised as 'mere' mistrust, do they propose to *do* about the fact of a country's existence?)

IV. VICTIMS OF HISTORY—OR OF OUR OWN XENOPHOBIA?

There is a general belief in Britain that Germany was helped by the destruction of its industry in the war to start everything from scratch. But Britain's relative economic decline had begun long before the Second World War, and dates back to the beginning of this century. The glorious military past has been used in Britain as a sort of consolation for failure in the here-and-now. Every continuing German success in the economic sphere has been seen as further reason for vigilance and reminding ourselves of the dangers of Germany. If everything ever does happen it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy! If Germany has been successful it is not, fifty years on, as a result of the supposed flying start provided by being bombed back to the Stone Age in 1945. German industry has organised itself better, and restrained its unions long before the British thought of doing so after 1979. German industrialists have reinvested their profits, rather than spent them on Rolls Royces. Their growth has been export-led because they do something as a matter of course that no English person would imagine doing in his or her wildest dreams: they (*be it spoken softly*) learn to speak foreign languages—I mean properly! By contrast, every Briton *knows*, and knows nothing with greater certainty, that it is pretentious to even pronounce a foreign word correctly (effeminate in the case of Romance languages). Of course, we don't say these things. It wouldn't be nice. In any case, we don't have to; it's obvious! And the fact that English is a world language just makes our continuing self-delusion easier. Now, with eastern Europe opening up for business, who's first off the mark? The Germans. And who's last? Well, us. The same old story. Perhaps it doesn't matter. It just illustrates that the Germans are incurably domineering. As for us, we take things in a more relaxed vein because, well, the world owes us a living. What for? Well, for winning the Second World War of course!

I realise that the state of mind I'm pillorying here is no longer as prominent as it was in, say, the 1970s. Thatcherism created a new work-ethic to some extent, although the indolent beast in the British appears to have been temporarily scotched, not killed. In any case, the Thatcherite triumph over sloth and the nanny-state was only brought about by bringing to the fore some of our other worst qualities: like flag-waving isolationism. Nicholas Ridley's anti-German outburst was an unfortunate *gaffe* for which he had to resign because protocol demanded it; he almost certainly represented the actual views of the inner circle of the government (remember the Iron Lady's opposition to German reunification?), not to mention those of large sections of British society, Christian and non-Christian alike.

V. A CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE?

Christianity may not be responsible for creating these foolish attitudes in modern Britain, but Christians are certainly capable of imbibing them from surrounding society. And many Christians in the dim and distant past certainly helped to create a sort of 'spiritual' nationalism which continues to pervade the church today: a general, not always articulated belief that 'when this was a godly country, God helped us to enslave and exploit a quarter of the world in the glorious British Empire'. There are certainly some ghosts that could do with exorcising.

The Scriptures claim that the gospel has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. What about the barriers erected by the Second World War? How about the barriers between the British and the children of their parents' and grandparents' enemies? And forgiveness? Certainly amongst older people there is a need for that, and this will not be easy. Many have suffered much, and many have inflicted much. But amongst the rest of us? If I commit some unspeakable crime against your relatives, do you need to forgive my children? What for? Existing? Do your grandchildren need to 'forgive' my grandchildren? Put this way, the fallacies are obvious. Can't we, as Christians, take the lead in demonstrating how we can walk free of our self-made and self-perpetuated hatreds and fears?

VI. A NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT?

Increasingly, the reactions of a new generation of Germans towards the outbursts of Basil Fawlty and Nicholas Ridley—or any of the more prosaic manifestations of our continuing national obsession—will be ones of embarrassment. But—and here's the rub—the embarrassment will not be for themselves; rather, it will be of the same kind that anyone feels when confronted by someone making a complete public fool of himself. Here are the British adopting an attitude of superiority when there is nothing, literally nothing, to feel superior about.

The situation was best summed up by a German industrialist who was being interviewed on a British radio programme. 'Every time we open a new car plant in Germany,' he said, 'you open up a new museum to the Battle of Britain. That's fine. But how are you going to live?'

He's right. Fifty years on, let's thank our grandparents one more time for what they did. Let's remember the lessons of history, and teach them to our children: the folly of appeasement, and the depths to which human beings can sink. And then let's stop making fools of ourselves and give the whole thing a rest!