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(Re-)Writing the Holocaust After Brexit: The Afterlives of British Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of a Nazi-occupied Britain in post-2016 reworkings of earlier alternative histories in which Britain lost the war. It does so by placing the 2017 television series *SS-GB* and C. J. Carey's 2021 novel *Widowland* in conversation with their original counterparts: Len Deighton's 1978 novel of the same name and Robert Harris' *Fatherland* of 1992, respectively. Each text therefore has to imagine the consequences of Nazi victory for the Jews of Britain. Appearing in a post-Brexit context in which questions of national sovereignty and identity have been contentiously brought to the fore, these adaptations reveal a tendency towards British heroism in the face of European domination, and reinforce the isolationist messages that had been central to the referendum's 'Leave' campaign. In each case, the British setting reveals the potential for political danger to be found close to home. The encroachment of what had been considered the European malaise of antisemitic murder into the British present is articulated through the act of revision and adaptation. This article shows how the themes of the original works were employed post-2016, and asks why the wartime murder of the Jews is ultimately not their central concern.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust; Brexit; *SS-GB*; *Widowland*; Britain; invasion

Introduction

On June 23, 2016, the people of the United Kingdom voted in a national referendum. They were asked a single question: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' The question was clearly a vexed one: With 72.2 percent turnout (33.5 million people), the referendum had attracted the highest number of voters since the early 1990s. By the end of the day, 51.9 percent of those who voted had elected to leave,¹ and so began the long process of Britain's withdrawal from the EU.

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¹Voting statistics varied over the devolved nations: Both Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain, while 53.4% of English voters opted to leave. Brexit has thus been described as having been "made in England." (Alisa Henderson, Charlie Jeffrey, Dan Wincott, and Richard Wyn Jones, "How Brexit was Made in England," *The British Journal of Politics*)

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The origins and implications of the referendum have been widely debated. Concerns over the perceived loss of national sovereignty, the British economy, and immigration have all been put forward as contributing elements.² In its literary representation, domestic factors such as ‘national identity,’ ‘marginalization and precarity,’ and ‘post-truth’ have also been highlighted as significant.³ At the heart of the debate were questions about the role of Britain on the world stage, and an acute demonstration of the ‘little-island exceptionalism’ that has formed the basis of Britain’s collective memory of World War 2 (itself a founding myth of national identity, particularly in England).

Given such a context, it is perhaps surprising that 17 months earlier, in January 2015, just a month after the European Union Referendum Act was given Royal Assent and thus became law, the government announced a Foundation established to build a new UK Memorial to the Holocaust (UKHMF). Designed as a ‘a permanent statement of our values as a nation,’⁴ the initiative invoked memories of European conflict to underscore ideas about the perceived British national character. As Andy Pearce writes: ‘The UKHMF project was born in a time before Brexit. However, since its inception, it has followed a course that has become entwined with broader conflicts around nationhood and identity in twenty-first-century Britain.’⁵

In this article, we consider the entwinement of British memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust in the context of Brexit through its appearance in fictional form. We do so by analysing the representation of a Nazi-occupied Britain in texts that have appeared since 2016, contrasting them with the twentieth-century pre-Brexit originals to which they respond. These works, both imagining the aftermath of Nazi victory in the Battle of Britain of 1940, are the 2017 television series *SS-GB*, based on Len Deighton’s 1978 novel of the same name, and C. J. Carey’s novel *Widowland*, a depiction of Nazi-occupied Britain consisting of a look back from the vantage-point of 2021 at Robert Harris’s *Fatherland* of 1992. We ask whether the ‘Leave’ outcome of the UK’s referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016 prompted a return to these alternative histories of World War 2, and whether revisiting the earlier works’ scenario of fascism in Britain was viewed as an opportunity to reflect on the motivations and possible consequences of departure from the EU.

As our examples show, it is the relationship of Britain to the rest of Europe, and the ‘cultural beliefs, real or imaginary’ regarding that relationship from which the ‘Leave’ result ‘grew,’ which are most notably addressed in this counterfactual form.⁶ The conviction of British wartime exceptionalism that motivated the ‘Leave’ vote is put to the test by the imagining by these works of what a Nazi occupation of Britain might have looked

and International Relations, 19, no. 4 [2017]: pp. 631–46). Voting trends also varied depending on voter age, ethnicity, social class, and political-party membership.

²For example, Harold D. Clarke et al., *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 5.

³See, respectively, Janine Hauthal, “Explaining Brexit: Re-thinking the Nexus of Nation and Narration in Pre- and Post-Brexit Fiction,” in Antonius Weixler et al., (eds.), *Postfactisches Erzählen? Post Truth – Fake News – Narration* (New York: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 297–331; Kristian Shaw, *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 3; Birte Heidemann, “The Brexit Within: Mapping the Rural and the Urban in Contemporary British Fiction,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 56, no. 5 (2020): pp. 676–88, esp. 677.

⁴David Cameron, Jan. 26, 2016: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-35421006>

⁵Andy Pearce, “Britishness, Brexit, and the Holocaust,” in Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce, (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave, 2021), p. 472.

⁶“Introduction: Brexit and Literature,” in Robert Eaglestone, (ed.), *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

like. Yet, despite the implications of such a scenario, there is a reluctance in each case to envisage the full consequences for the Jews. This is surprising, since the revisitations in the Brexit era of Deighton's and Harris's classic counterfactual visions of a British capitulation might seem designed to challenge those beliefs that arise from the UK's particular memorial culture of the war and the Holocaust – most recently exemplified in the debates around the new national memorial mentioned above. These include the conviction of Britain's singular moral and military superiority and, in light of the UK mainland remaining unoccupied, its efforts to save Europe's Jews in the face of insuperable odds.⁷

In conclusion, we ask why the televised *SS-GB* and *Widowland* both ultimately shy away from fully imagining the consequences for Britain's Jews of a Nazi occupation, and what the reasons are for the counterfactual pattern of engaging with factors other than 'the reality of the events of the genocide' continuing to characterize these Brexit-era works.⁸ Ultimately, we argue that the sidelining of the Jewish story and repurposing of the history of Nazi brutality is part of a troubling trend of normalization and appropriation of Holocaust memory for specific purposes.

SS-GB

Published in 1978, amid 'the anxieties of Britain's early membership of the European communities,' Len Deighton's *SS-GB* appeared at a time when concerns about national identity and sovereignty were festering in the public psyche.⁹ The appearance in the same year of the BBC drama *An Englishman's Castle*, which, like *SS-GB*, tells the story of British defeat and subsequent occupation at the hands of the Germans during World War II, further attests to a cultural climate riddled with anxieties about the nation's role within the wider European community.¹⁰ Fintan O'Toole describes the perception of the EU as having enacted an 'invasion by stealth,' resulting in domination by a European superpower that could not be fought by the military tactics with which Britain was apparently more comfortable; according to him, '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.'¹¹ The motif of foreign invasion and occupation works as an apt symbol for the perceived European threat to British autonomy, and had the potential to capture the British imagination as it clung on to prevalent postwar nostalgia and the desire to return to a sense of imperial greatness.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Deighton's narrative was brought back to public attention in November 2014, a year after Prime Minister David Cameron announced his intention to give the British people the 'simple choice' of whether or not to remain in the EU.¹² In announcing an adaptation of a novel that celebrates British resilience in the face of European domination, the series capitalized on the fraught debates surrounding British identity and the evolving role of the nation on the world stage. Whatever the

⁷These convictions are explored in contributions to Lawson and Pearce, *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*.

⁸Adams, "Relationships to Realism," p. 92.

⁹Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), p. 29.

¹⁰Paul Ciappesoni (dir.), *An Englishman's Castle* (BBC, 1978).

¹¹O'Toole, *Heroic Failure*, p. 52.

¹²*BBC News*, "David Cameron promises in/out referendum on EU," (Jan. 23, 2013): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21148282> (last accessed July 27, 2022).

motivation, the production and dissemination of *SS-GB* was chronologically, politically, and culturally entangled with Britain's withdrawal from the European Union: The law enabling the referendum vote to go ahead was passed in May 2015, and production of the new TV series started the following October, finally wrapping in January 2016, a few months before the final vote took place in the June of that year.¹³

Cultural institutions such as the BBC were not alone in using memories of World War II around this time: Politicians were also harnessing the rhetoric of war to further their own Brexit-related agendas. In January 2017, for example, then-foreign-secretary Boris Johnson compared French President François Hollande to a World War II prison guard who wanted to give the United Kingdom 'punishment beatings' over Brexit.¹⁴ Former Deputy Prime Minister and member of the House of Lords, Michael Heseltine, fought on the opposite side of the debate, arguing against what he called 'a disaster of British self-interest'; yet his disapproval of the nation's withdrawal paradoxically stemmed from his suspicion of Germany's growing power in Europe and the loss of Britain's perceived ability to mitigate it. He controversially stated:

Hitler was democratically elected in Germany. He unleashed the most horrendous war. This country played a unique role in securing his defeat. So Germany lost the war. We've just handed them the opportunity to win the peace. I find that quite unacceptable.¹⁵

Having attempted to employ anti-German sentiments to buttress a pro-European argument, Heseltine found himself on the receiving end of criticism from all sides.

The entire run of *SS-GB* was sandwiched between these two statements, airing between February 19 and March 19, 2017. Just ten days later, Prime Minister Theresa May triggered Article 50, formally beginning the process of Britain's withdrawal from the European community. Relying at least partly on wartime nostalgia and a sense of British superiority, themes central to *SS-GB* were clearly deemed relevant to the debates about national identity that were brought to the surface by the referendum vote.

The fate of the Jews

The novel and the TV adaptation both follow the experiences of Detective Superintendent Douglas Archer – Archer of the Yard, as he is known – who, alongside his partner Harry Woods, attempts to navigate the complexities of the German occupation in Britain following the former's victory during the war. When asked to investigate a murder of an atomic physicist, the two get caught up in various internal rivalries on the German side, while also being forced to confront differing ideas of duty, honor, and patriotism on the part of the British. In both versions of the story, the victimization of Jews is hinted at only peripherally, with the occasional yellow star and a few briefly-mentioned signs on shop doors. Persecution looms in the background – as Standartenführer Oskar Huth, Archer's German superior with whom he had built considerable rapport, reminds Archer, the rumors of Dachau 'are all true, believe me,' – but it

¹³The book was slated to be made into a Canadian film in the 1970s by producers Harry Benn and Harry Alan Towers and starring James Mason, but the adaptation never materialized.

¹⁴*BBC News*, "Brexit: Boris Johnson warns against 'punishment beatings,'" (Jan. 18, 2017): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38658998> (last accessed July 27, 2022).

¹⁵*Guardian Press Association*, "Michael Heseltine: Germany will 'win the peace' because of Brexit," (March 24, 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/mar/24/germany-will-win-the-peace-in-europe-because-of-brexit-says-lord-heseltine> (last accessed July 27, 2022).

exists merely as a thinly veiled threat rather than an existential reality in the present.¹⁶ Even the roundup that constitutes the German response to the Resistance's bombing of Karl Marx's grave culminates in a detention camp that centralizes British suffering over that of the Jewish community; the novel briefly acknowledges 'a young girl [who] tore the yellow cloth star from her coat and climbed across the low pen railing to join another group of prisoners,' but Archer's central concern is Woods, his colleague and friend who has also been placed under arrest.¹⁷ The history of Nazi oppression against the Jews is thus sidelined in favor of an emphasis on British suffering and the threat to the British community, represented most forcefully through the separation of Woods and Archer.

A revealing example of the displacement of Jewishness is found in the characterization of the Spode brothers – responsible for developing the nuclear technology that would eventually turn the tide of the war. Yet it was, historically speaking, two Jewish refugees in Britain, Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls, who made the historical breakthrough in nuclear science, published as the Frisch-Peierls Memorandum of March 1940. The Jewishness and refugee status of these characters is erased in both the novel and the TV series, replaced instead by this reference to Josiah Spode, the paupers' orphan who became synonymous with the Industrial Revolution as a famous English potter. One might thus understand the adoption of the Spode name as a means of emphasizing the narrative of British advancement and success against the odds. The central concern of the story – in both its original novel form and the subsequent adaptation – is thus not the persecution of the Jews, but rather promoting a certain brand of Englishness.

Germany's new victims: the Brits

This displacement is neatly outlined in the tension that arises between Douglas Archer and Harry Woods. From the outset, Archer plays an ambiguous role; his ability to speak German and his willingness to co-operate with his German superiors casts him in a morally dubious position. As O'Toole puts it, enlisting the discourses of Brexit-era Britain: 'Archer, at least as we originally encounter him, 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.'¹⁸ In a meeting with General Kellerman and two members of the 'Propaganda-Kompanie,' Archer is met with immediate approval: 'This Englishman was exactly right for them ... He was 'Germanic,' a perfect example of 'the new European.' And he even spoke excellent German.'¹⁹

Yet Archer's ability to acquiesce to the new situation sets him in opposition to other, more 'English' characters in the book, at least in its early stages:

For Harry, the fighting would never end. His generation, who'd fought and won in the filth of Flanders, would never come to terms with defeat. But Douglas Archer had not been a soldier. As long as the Germans let him get on with the job of catching murderers, he'd do his work as he'd always done it. He wished Harry would see it his way.²⁰

¹⁶Deighton, *SS-GB*, p. 212.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁸O'Toole, *Heroic Brexit*, p. 29.

¹⁹Deighton, *SS-GB*, p. 9.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

The increasingly complex relationship between Archer and Woods constitutes the most prominent display of the different attitudes to German power in the story, though Archer's collaborative tendencies are also dramatically highlighted by Sylvia, a former lover and member of the Resistance who calls him a 'bloody Gestapo bastard'.²¹ As if to emphasize their affiliation with the wider political situation, both Woods and Sylvia experience physical violence and extreme peril, but neither is defeated or deterred. In this, they each act as a microcosm for Britain: beaten up, but not yet vanquished. Even here, though, the moral status of the characters is called into question, since Woods is finally revealed to have collaborated with Kellerman in order to protect Archer and his son, while Sylvia is caught up in the Resistance's plot to kidnap the child in order to manipulate his father. There is, it seems, no moral absolutism to be gleaned from Deighton's novel.

Nevertheless, the evolution of Archer's character must be seen in relation to that of Sylvia, whose extended role constitutes one of the BBC's most significant deviations from the novel. In the book, she dies trying to save Woods as they attempt to escape the detention center following the roundup. In the TV series, on the other hand, she manages to escape, reemerging at various points as resistance-in-hiding, even taking responsibility for the bomb at Highgate cemetery that nearly killed several members of the Nazi high command, before finally joining Woods and Archer on their quest to liberate the king and dispatch him to America. Sitting beside the king in the car, Sylvia casually holds his hand, referring to him affectionately as 'Georgie'.²² She later dies alongside him in a symbolic act of patriotic martyrdom.

With Sylvia's alternative trajectory working in the televised version to emphasize the strength and commitment of the British resistance, the eventual reconciliation of Sylvia, Woods and Archer takes on renewed force. Once an ambiguous figure whose loyalty to his homeland was in doubt, Douglas Archer finally aligns himself with the resistance movement. In the novel, the key moment comes when he pulls a gun on Huth. In the TV series, however, the turning point comes as the three protagonists reconcile in the car as they flee to the coast with the frail king. As they briefly stop *en route*, Sylvia turns to the king and says: 'Look, Sir, it's England, your land';²³ without a response, Woods lightens the mood by singing an old English folksong ('Wop She 'ad It-io' by Bob, Ron, and John Copper); the three laugh together, finally united in their British heritage and combined determination to save the monarch, a metaphor for the country at large.

Their journey to the sea is not without its mishaps, however. In a scene that is entirely absent from the book, the car in which the group is traveling gets a flat tyre and is forced to stop at a nearby farmhouse. Unfortunately for them, the family they encounter turn out to be a group of collaborators who intend to sell them out to the Germans in exchange for certain privileges. Following a knowing nod from Sylvia – who again plays the vital role of British protector – Archer overpowers one brother before shooting the other. Archer, it seems, must overcome the threat of collaboration that has haunted him throughout in order to fully take his place in the fight for British sovereignty. The narrative is thus centrally concerned with Archer's transition from acquiescence and

²¹Ibid., p. 36.

²²Kadelbach, *SS-GB*, episode V (BBC, March 19, 2017), 00'18'13.

²³Ibid., 00'21'54.

complicity to a defender of British values and independence. It is easy to see why such a message might appeal in the context of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. By relegating the plight of the Jews to the background, both the novel and the TV series are able to focus on the primary relationship between Germany and Britain without raising the uncomfortable issue of the latter's failure to protect the Jews from Nazi persecution.

The novel concludes with a focus on the complexities of German power; Huth prepares for his death by firing squad, orchestrated by Kellerman. Although the nuclear plans have successfully been smuggled out of the country, and America has been reluctantly dragged into the war, the novel ends on a note of internal German rivalry; a reminder, perhaps, of the petty squabbles that had hindered German leadership in England and a hint of the brutality and egotism that define their structures of power (what Rosenfeld calls 'the prosaic internal bureaucratic turmoil' of the occupying forces).²⁴ By contrast, the TV series ends with Barbara Barga – an American journalist and Archer's love interest who is killed by the Gestapo in the novel – purposefully walking out of the American embassy. Meanwhile, following the death of Sylvia and the king and the incapacitation of Woods, Archer is seen struggling across the moors alone, copies of the nuclear plans and a map of the British countryside in his pocket, implying his resurfacing familiarity with the landscape (and values) of his country; in muted sepia tones, he blends into the background in a way that emphasizes his return to Britishness (Figure 1).²⁵

The ending of the TV series emphasizes the importance of British and American collaboration as a means of overthrowing European domination. Barga and Archer are united in their stride and purpose, with parallel editing used to suggest the simultaneity and connectedness of their actions. This coming together of two separate nations hints at the need for international collaboration outside of (and, indeed, in opposition to) European power. That the TV series ends here demonstrates the significance of Anglo-American relations in a post-Brexit world, where questions of British sovereignty can only be entertained once old imperial trade agreements have been reestablished. The so-called 'special relationship' between Britain and the US thus operates as a broader metaphor for the power of the Commonwealth and the legacy of the British Empire.

If, as Rosenfeld argues, Deighton's novel sought to dispel heroic myths of the recent British past by revealing the potential for collaboration and moral compromise, both versions ultimately stopped short of showing its likely consequences, ending instead with a triumphalist message of optimism that would likely appeal to British audiences in the post-referendum context.²⁶ The Holocaust and its Jewish victims are used merely as hints of the ethical stakes that are at play in a novel and TV series that are more centrally about British national identity.

***Widowland* (2021)**

The plot of C. J. Carey's *Widowland* unfolds in the Nazi-occupied Britain of 1953 under the conditions of a so-called Grand Alliance with Germany. As its title suggests, *Widowland* is a self-conscious revision of Robert Harris's counterfactual 1992 novel *Fatherland*,

²⁴Rosenfeld, *The World that Hitler Never Made*, pp. 65–6.

²⁵Kadelbach, *SS-GB*, episode V, 00'58'07.

²⁶Rosenfeld, *The World that Hitler Never Made*, p. 66.



Figure 1. Douglas Archer's return to the landscape, *SS-GB*, episode V, 0.

which imagines Nazi Germany to have won the war and turned Britain into an insignificant client state. *Widowland* takes a newly gender-centered perspective in which the malign consequences for women under Britain's occupation are imagined. *Fatherland*'s reliance on the imagery of 'hardboiled masculinity' in its portrayal of Xavier March, a disaffected SS detective in victorious Nazi Germany, is transformed into *Widowland*'s female coming-of-age story about the reluctant civil servant Rose Ransom.²⁷ The setting of Harris's novel in Berlin, the capital city of the Greater German Reich, is exchanged in Carey's for that of London, capital of the British Protectorate. Ransom's role of censoring and 'updating'²⁸ classic British women's literature to suit the new dispensation involves, as did the policeman's role for March, engaging in clandestine archival investigation that challenges the authoritarian master-narrative.

Widowland's altered location allows the implications of fascist rule to be felt more keenly by a British-identified readership, while the change to the protagonist's gender raises differently oriented questions about complicity and resistance. *Fatherland* focuses on March's gradually uncovering in Germany the suppressed truth about the mass murder of the Jews, while the setting of *Widowland* in Nazi-occupied UK relocates to Britain the imagery of acquiescence to authoritarian and genocidal rule. However, in *Widowland*, the secret revealed by Ransom is that of a literary history of women's defiance. Both novels are set in April, the month devoted to celebrating Hitler's birthday: Harris's in 1964, twenty years after Germany's wartime victory; Carey's in a reimagined version of 1953, thirteen years after a British surrender. In the latter, this is a coronation year, but, in the counterfactual world it is not that of Elizabeth II, as in the historical record, but rather of Edward VIII and his Queen Wallis Simpson. *Widowland* is structured to culminate with the coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey, at which the Leader – as the fictional Hitler is known throughout – is to make a rare appearance. This plotline typifies *Widowland*'s technique of expanding upon *Fatherland*'s apparently throwaway details and reversing its priorities to place them center-stage. The single mention of Edward and Wallis in Harris's novel, where March reads about plans for

²⁷Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2013), p. 65.

²⁸C. J. Carey, *Widowland* (London: Quercus, 2021), p. 40.

the royal couple's 'state visit' to the Reich,²⁹ is one element in the pattern of *Widowland's* elevating *Fatherland's* backdrop features to the status of central plot elements, a trend that comes to fruition in Carey's sequel *Queen High*, (2022), devoted to the eponymous Wallis.

One of the most notable revisioned details of this kind borrowed from *Fatherland* by *Widowland* is the appearance of graffiti in public spaces as a gesture of opposition. This is the briefly described expression of a rejuvenated White Rose student resistance in Harris's novel, but a significant mode of raising Ransom's feminist consciousness in Carey's, since she encounters such utterances as Mary Wollstonecraft's, painted onto the British Museum: '*Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and there will be an end to blind obedience.*'³⁰ Beyond this expression of dissent by women, the very notion of a biopolitical state on which *Widowland* depends is hinted at in passing by *Fatherland*, where abortion, as 'an act of sabotage against Germany's racial future,' is a capital offence.³¹ Yet, neither conventional resistance nor controlled reproduction has a role in Harris's novel beyond establishing the atmosphere of the imagined Greater Reich. In *Widowland*, the elaboration of gendered oppression and rebellion has the effect of laying bare *Fatherland's* patriarchal assumptions, while also making central the British experience of Nazi occupation.

Germany's new victims: the widows

As implied by its title, in Carey's novel the source of resistance to Nazi rule is found among women in the absence of men. The eponymous widows are shown to be the real victims of the Nazis' imposition in Britain of 'oppression, surveillance and ... deprivation.'³² It might thus seem that a concern with gender has supplanted that of race. Although the impetus to 'regulate breeding,'³³ in the phrase of Ransom's boss, SS officer Martin Kreutz, is clearly foundational to a racial state, *Widowland's* focus is on a political history of female defiance and its literary expression in Britain that the regime seeks to quash. This contrasts with the real-life targeting of Jewish women by the Nazis as a 'distinct biological and racial group,' only fleetingly acknowledged here.³⁴

Contemporary readers are likely to welcome *Widowland's* gender-aware changes to *Fatherland*. Carey's novel's construction of gender-based tyranny, a 'system' that 'suited older men,' whether British or German,³⁵ draws on contemporary phenomena such as #MeToo, with additional dismaying relevance to the 2022 overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* judgement protecting the right to abortion in the USA. In *Fatherland*, apart from the American journalist Charlie Maguire, who is March's investigative and romantic partner, the female characters are viewed through the protagonist's eyes as unnamed 'sour-faced' or 'bosomy' secretaries, while an archivist is a 'Gorgon.'³⁶ By

²⁹Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (London: Arrow 2009 [1992]), p. 40.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 155, 180, 236; Carey, *Widowland*, p. 105, italics in original, and pp. 132, 416.

³¹Harris, *Fatherland*, p. 97.

³²Carey, *Widowland*, p. 246.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 148.

³⁴Joan Ringelheim "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Signs*, 10, no. 4 (1985): pp. 741–61, esp. 745.

³⁵Carey, *Widowland*, p. 58.

³⁶Harris, *Fatherland*, pp. 19, 191, 251.

contrast to *Fatherland*'s representation of a totalitarian state where many details, including those of this kind of everyday sexism, are recognizable without being the novel's satirical concern, Carey's novel posits a caste system applied to women in Britain in relation to their 'heritage' and 'racial characteristics,' but also 'reproductive status.'³⁷ In *Fatherland*, March identifies himself within the top 'order of acceptability' among the state's racial 'strains,' while the counterpart in *Widowland* is Ransom's status as an elite Geli, named after the Leader's beloved niece Angela Raubal to signify the highest of the seven female castes in relation to her youth and eligibility.³⁸

At the bottom of the hierarchy in Carey's novel are the so-called Friedas, women without husbands and beyond child-bearing age who now inhabit the districts known as Widowlands. This mistreatment follows the detail of the real-life persecution of the Jews under Nazi domination. While rules regulating the women's access to public spaces are based on the Nuremberg Laws, the Widowlands' 'desolate residential districts,' consisting of 'littered streets ringed around with tangled wire,' where the inmates are subject to police raids, are modeled on the real-life ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland.³⁹ This points to the nature of the fate envisaged for the widows, as Kreutz outlines it to Ransom: 'We go into the Widowlands, round them [the widows] up and get rid of them once and for all. After all, we have the experience.'⁴⁰

The mystified Ransom is given clarification about what this 'experience' consists of in phrasing that haunts her. Just as March cannot forget Charlie Maguire's mention of 'millions of vanished Jews,' Ransom is transfixed by Kreutz's words: 'It's not as if it hasn't been done before.'⁴¹ In each case, the reader knows more than the protagonist. Yet, in *Widowland*, this allusion to the mass murder of Europe's Jews is to a finished deed whose status is outside the novel's plot. Rose's personal ignorance is not part of a shared conspiracy of silence, as in *Fatherland*, where it has the result that, in Maguire's phrasing, it is as if the Jews 'had never existed.'⁴² As is also the case in *SS-GB*, the genocide's significance in *Widowland* is rather that of a template that might be deployed against others, for reasons that include here the widows' 'rebellious' actions.⁴³ In common with other examples of Brexit-era fiction, including Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* (2019), the Jewish history of flight and persecution is invoked to demonstrate the populist threat posed by Brexit to liberal pluralism and democratic values, rather than for the sake of its historical actuality.

The fate of the Jews

Instead of the fate of the Jews being uncovered through the traces of documents and archaeological remains as in *Fatherland*,⁴⁴ we learn in *Widowland* that, although they are persecuted on 'the mainland,' a deal has been struck in Britain between the Protector Alfred Rosenberg and the new monarch 'to save our Jews.'⁴⁵ As the king grudgingly adds,

³⁷Carey, *Widowland*, p. 20.

³⁸Harris, *Fatherland*, p. 96; Carey, *Widowland*, p. 20.

³⁹Carey, *Widowland*, pp. 124, 58.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴¹Harris, *Fatherland*, pp. 118–9; Carey, *Widowland*, p. 227.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴³Carey, *Widowland*, p. 227.

⁴⁴Morgan, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, p. 56.

⁴⁵Carey, *Widowland*, p. 288.

implying a debt owed personally to him, ‘They ought to be damned grateful. What more can they ask?’⁴⁶

In Carey’s counterfactual design, the victim role is therefore taken by non-Jewish British women and resisters in this vision of a Nazi-occupied Britain. Indeed, as shown by the novel’s scenario of the exile of Princess Elizabeth and ascension to the throne of Edward VIII and Queen Wallis, it is not the introduction of genocidal policies that conveys the cost of Britain’s surrender, but rather the assault on national symbology. Thus, the reader learns that the Ritz Hotel is now the SS headquarters, the Women’s Institute has been outlawed, and citizens sing ‘Land of Alliance Glory,’ an uncanny new version of the patriotic original, ‘Land of Hope and Glory.’⁴⁷

However, rather than *Widowland* failing to emulate *Fatherland*’s focus on the Jews, it seems that Carey’s novel does follow Harris’s lead in consigning them to the background. Neither novel includes the victims themselves. Jewish characters appear only in the form of documentary traces: March in *Fatherland* is intrigued by discovering behind the wallpaper in his apartment a photograph of its former occupant, Jacob Weiss, while Ransom’s archival research in *Widowland* produces a diary from 1941, kept by the teenage Agatha Kettler about her life in hiding. In Harris’s novel, the ingenuity of the plot, and uncertainty about March’s individual destiny, substitutes for suspense about the conspiracy he uncovers, since it is no mystery to the reader. In Carey’s, the threat to Britain’s Jews is subsumed by a wider danger that lies not in the past, but rather in the future. A Jewish family friend, Dr Freeman, is an unseen presence who has provided Ransom’s father with a cyanide capsule, suggesting it is not the ‘racial’ victims of the regime who might need it, but rather its political opponents.⁴⁸

While *Fatherland* centers on uncovering the decision to commit genocide taken at the Wannsee Conference of 1942, *Widowland*’s suspense arises from its imagined British equivalent: a meeting scheduled to take place at Blenheim Palace. Yet, as suggested by the choice of Churchill’s family home for this event, even this ominous development is significant because of its threat to Britons in general, as Ransom’s colleague Oliver puts it: ‘My guess is, they’ll *start with the Jews.*’⁴⁹ The novel’s cliff-hanger ending, in which Ransom is poised to assassinate the Leader on his visit to Westminster Abbey, defers any fictive embodiment of what might have been a Blenheim Protocol about a ‘Final Solution’ to what is described here as the ‘Britain problem.’⁵⁰

For *Widowland*, this ‘swerve’ away from imagining the fate of Jews in a Nazi-occupied UK seems to arise from unwillingness to realize fully the contemporary anxieties about Britain’s departure from the EU and its seeming likeness to aspects of German history.⁵¹ Rather, Carey’s novel suggests that ‘Englishness’ will save the day.⁵² Not only is the legacy of novels such as *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre* and the works of ‘Frau Gaskell’ on which Rose Ransom is working shown to inspire independent thinking, but England’s ‘ancient’

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 288.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 144.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 373, our italics.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 245.

⁵¹Robert Eaglestone. ‘Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction,’ *Holocaust Studies*, 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): pp. 13–26, esp. 13.

⁵²Carey, *Widowland*, p. 35.

landscape and ‘enchanted, archaic’ poetry are also a source of moral strength.⁵³ The words ‘Nazi’ and ‘Hitler’ are absent in a way that makes more ‘generic’ the novel’s image of authoritarianism.⁵⁴ However, its portrayal is far from that of home-grown fascism and the murder of British Jews as depicted, in what is so far a lone instance, in Howard Jacobson’s *J: A Novel* (2014). This unwillingness to imagine the process of genocide taking place on British soil persists, despite historical evidence of deportation from the occupied Channel Islands, not to mention the very impetus for *Widowland*’s post-2016 composition as a cautionary allegory. It emerges partly from counterfactual fiction’s tendency to leave the events of the Holocaust ‘intact,’⁵⁵ but also from the novel’s seeming to imply that an individual courageous act on the part of a young woman in Britain might succeed in toppling the German Reich.

Widowland, like *Fatherland* and *SS-GB*, concludes open-endedly, while suggesting that all is not lost. Such optimism sits oddly with the fact that Nazi-occupied Britain is modeled in Carey’s novel on Brexit-era strictures and attendant ‘cultural introversion,’ to which no end is in sight.⁵⁶ *Widowland*’s counterfactual society is a version of post-2016 Britain, since international travel restrictions mean that in the novel people are reduced to taking local ‘Strength through Joy’ trips to the seaside resort of Clacton or the Lake District, while shop windows are ‘stacked with fake goods to disguise the shortages.’⁵⁷ Ransom’s disenchanted father blames ‘The Events’ of the surrender on a ‘failure of leadership’ by the country’s government of ‘charlatans and fools,’ in phrasing adapted from coverage of the referendum’s conduct and process of withdrawal from the EU.⁵⁸

However, the conceit of Carey’s novel, that British defeat in 1940 is a cipher for the real-life repudiation of the EU in 2016, seems contradictorily to rely on those wartime stereotypes of German barbarity and aggression that were part of the ‘Leave’ vote’s motivation. This imagery is perhaps an occupational hazard of counterfactual fiction about World War 2, but also an inheritance from *Fatherland*, which appeared in the 1992 context of anxiety at German reunification and the signing of the EU’s foundational Maastricht Treaty.⁵⁹ *Fatherland*’s portrayal of an ascendant Greater Reich, in which the German mark is the currency and Britain has been ‘corralled’ into a pan-European ‘trading bloc’ that advantages only Germany, embodies a strand of Euro-sceptical discourse that conflicts with Harris’s staunchly pro-Remain position at the time of the referendum.⁶⁰ The novels by Ali Smith and Linda Grant, as well as others ranging from Sarah Perry’s *Melmoth* (2018) to Deborah Levy’s *The Man Who Saw Everything* (2019), invoke the prewar flight of Jewish refugees to Britain as a contrast with the ominous lessening of the gulf between present-day UK and fascist Germany. However, the return to a wartime setting in *Widowland* sidesteps what Nazi occupation might mean for the Jews in Britain. Acknowledging the possibility of persecution and murder in Britain is shown to be incompatible with the mythology of wartime exceptionalism, even in a novel motivated by dismay at the UK’s post-2016 fortunes.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 137, 121.

⁵⁴Jane Thynne [C.J. Carey], personal correspondence, July 18, 2021.

⁵⁵Adams, “Relationships to Realism,” p. 87.

⁵⁶Thynne, personal correspondence.

⁵⁷Carey, *Widowland*, pp. 88, 113.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 15. For the real-life phrasing, see the publication by the political campaign group, *Led By Donkeys: How Four Friends with a Ladder Took on Brexit* (London: Atlantic Books, 2019).

⁵⁹Harris, *Fatherland*, p. 20. See Rau, *Our Nazis*, p. 84; Morgan, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, p. 58.

⁶⁰Morgan, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, p. 58.

Conclusion

In the television series *SS-GB*, a box of yellow Star of David patches arrives at Scotland Yard, the headquarters of London's Metropolitan Police. The shock of this detail was singled out in reviews for instilling 'dread in the pit of your stomach,' and giving events a 'hum of horror' by making clear in visual terms the ominous implications of Britain's occupation by the Nazis.⁶¹

However, such 'dread' arises more in response to the incongruity of these patches appearing in a British setting than because they are a prompt to envisage the historical possibility of Jewish persecution. The box of stars is in the 'background,' sharing the role of the Holocaust imagery in our other examples as part of 'a set of dystopian tropes' that function simply to bolster the counterfactual atmosphere.⁶² In the drama, Sylvia succeeds in destroying the yellow stars by throwing her lighted cigarette into the box. Their destruction serves to dramatize the fact that, even when contemplated from a post-2016 British vantage point that seeks to reassess the war's recall, such an event as the targeting and murder of the Jews can only remain outside the plot.

As we have argued, the canonical counterfactual novels by Deighton and Harris were adapted and revised by the television drama *SS-GB* and Carey's *Widowland* in response to Brexit. The jarring concept of German victory, which was foundational to the earlier works, is reimaged in the later ones to suggest that the alien presence of the Nazis in Britain is now a fitting expression of post-2016 trends, including the complicity of individuals with populism, authoritarianism, misinformation, and aversion to immigration. This irony shapes even the plot in *Widowland*, where the action has been transferred from the original's Berlin to London. Yet, the troubling likeness between invader and unwilling host stops short in both works at the notion of the persecution and murder of the Jews in Britain. The invocation of the war remains separate from that of the Holocaust. The televised *SS-GB* and *Widowland* therefore enact the contradiction at the heart of communal recall in Britain more broadly. This consists of the disjunction between the triumphalist national story of 'heroic sacrifice in a decent, democratic cause', and the murder of the European Jews – which was not prevented.⁶³

A version of such an impasse equally characterizes such state-sponsored Holocaust memorialization as the UK Holocaust Memorial (UKHM). The memorial's planned location is close to the Houses of Parliament, so that visitors will emerge to 'a view of Victoria Tower' on the Palace of Westminster, to 'remind' them 'that this place [Britain] is a bastion against tyranny.'⁶⁴ Instead of what Meriel Schindler calls the necessary 'self-examination' evident in Germany, official and cultural Holocaust commemoration in Britain makes clear that the crimes are those committed by others.⁶⁵ As David

⁶¹Eleanor Bley Griffiths, review of *SS-GB*:

<https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/bbc-drama-ss-gb-delivers-a-brilliantly-unsettling-alternative-history-of-the-second-world-war/>; and Victoria Segal, review, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/television-review-a-thoroughly-nazi-turn-of-events-gr0hv8mhd>

⁶²Segal, review; Morgan, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, p. 58.

⁶³Meriel Schindler, *The Lost Café Schindler: One Family, Two Wars and the Search for Truth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2021), p. 384; Tony Kushner, "'Loose Connections?' Britain and the 'Final Solution,'" in Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen, (eds.), *Britain and the Holocaust: Remembering and Representing Genocide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

⁶⁴Former British MPs Ed Balls and Eric Pickles, quoted in David Tollerton, "Visions of Permanence, Realities of Instability: The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission and the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation," in Lawson and Pearce, (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook*, p. 453.

⁶⁵Schindler, *The Lost Café Schindler*, p. 384.

Tollerton has argued, in the post-2016 era it is hard not to see the UKHM's chosen setting as a 'physical embodiment of the nation taking leave of older, transnational (especially European) models of Holocaust memory' to construct instead a sense of local virtue.⁶⁶ Most tellingly for our literary and televisual examples, this means that the Jews themselves are notable in their absence, not only from the counterfactual originals, but also their Brexit-era revisions.

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⁶⁶Tollerton, "Visions of Permanence," p. 453.