

Being beastly about the Germans: police, violence, and nationalism in mid-twentieth century Britain

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NB Draft – do not quote without permission. You'd be a fool to, in any case.

This paper is all over the place. Luckily for you all, it began as my reaction to the far more coherent paper that you've just heard: so you've got at least a small chance of working out what I've trying to say.

- Traditional Whig Police History: its nationalistic excesses and its foreign villains
- Control Commission for Germany (British Element)
- National Stereotypes: Of Germans held by English
- National Stereotypes: Of English held by English
- Stereotypes in action in the immediate post-war period: hyperbolic rhetoric from sometimes unexpected quarters.

To start with, let's glance at traditional Whig History of the police, and pick up on the extent to which it's about national exceptionalism, and the nature of that exceptionalism. In his books of the 1940s and 1950s, Charles Reith went to sometimes absurd lengths to eulogise the British police. His work was not completely maverick, but an example of a very powerful and widely (though not uniformly) supported organising concept, of an impartial police in a pacified state.

Reith's work has been seen as just bog-standard apology - in fact, it's an attempt to link the lessons of a successful police system to wider issues, not least of which is the war and the nature of the post-war settlement. In *British Police and the Democratic Ideal*, he presents the police as a special and unique exemplar of British exceptionalism, and thus the reason why the UK will win the war.¹ He also advocates an international system based on the British police as the way to enforce disarmament and collective security after the war. The ultimate expression of British genius is the police force: this is hence elevated to central place in the panoply of what we are fighting for

¹ C. Reith, , *British police and the democratic ideal*, (London, 1943)

British police are human: foreign police aren't, really: Alwyn Solmes, in his book of police history of 1935, wrote of a 'foreign friend' claiming "'What I like about your Bobby is he's so human.'" Quite true; he is.² A fan of the achievements of the British Control Commission for Germany claimed that: 'something has undoubtedly happened to the German policeman. He is less arrogant, more polite and more human than his pre-war counterpart. . . .Before 1945, German policemen did not smile.'³ Alwyn Solmes also ends his stirring hymn to the British police with a call, not to the hearth or to civic responsibility, but to King and Country: 'Then here's to "Our Friend the Bobby"; and GOD SAVE OUR KING, whose Peace he guards within the Realm!'⁴

In 1979 Cyril Robinson wrote about the way that the traditional view of the history of the British police was ideology masked as history.⁵ Robinson looked at it in terms of how closely it approached history. It's worth taking another look at exactly what the ideology was saying, because it had a very wide influence, and it hasn't gone away. The myth of non-violent nation protected by non-violent police is still a very powerful.

From France to Germany

The Germans have not always been seen as the only country with the unaccountable and thus often brutal and militaristic police force. There's always been the French. Before the 1930s, the French Gendarme had been the stock illiberal foreign policeman, always ready to be wheeled out, compared to his accountable (but never 'political') British counterpart, and found wanting.

In Charles Reith's *New Study of Police History*, he claims that in 1829: 'The oldest and largest functioning system was that of the gendarmerie police of the Continent, which Fouché had developed in France into the tyrannical, early-totalitarian police of that country.'⁶ In reality Fouché, had very little to do with the police of Paris, and nothing to do with the Gendarmerie.⁷ The phrase that sticks out here, though, is the classically teleological 'early-totalitarian'.

Given the central role that T.A. Critchley played as a Home Office civil servant in remodelling the British police in the early 1960s, it was unsurprising that in his *History of*

² A. Solmes *The English Policeman: 871 - 1935* (George Allen and Unwin: London, 1935) p. 248.

³ R. Ebsworth *Restoring Democracy in Germany: The British Contribution*. (London, Stevens and Sons, 1960), p. 184.

⁴ Solmes p. 252.

⁵ Robinson, C.D., 'Ideology as history: a look at the way in which some English police historians look at the police' in *Police Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1979), 35-49.

⁶ C Reith *A New Study of Police History* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1954) p. 134.

⁷ C. Emsley *Policing and its context 1750-1870* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1983). p. 34.

Police in England and Wales he painted a picture of police institutions developing towards an ever-more perfect finale.⁸ It is more surprising that he too wrote a homage to British uniqueness along the lines of Reith's *British Police and the Democratic Ideal*, entitled *The Conquest of Violence*. It tells the story of how police and British society have worked together down the ages to progressively eliminate disorder. One representative quote, referring to the mid 1700s, is:

‘A repressive *maréchaussée* or *gendarmerie* was all very well for the French, and the creation of a Berlin state police in 1742 would have occasioned no surprise at the characteristic behaviour of the Germans, but to the English these were sinister institutions.’⁹

After the second world war, the Gendarme was replaced by the brutal plainclothes German political policeman. This image had very little to do with the Gestapo of reality. As Gellately has pointed out: membership of the Gestapo was in fact remarkably small - around 32,000 by the end of 1945.¹⁰ The political police were only effective in Germany due to the degree of co-operation they received from supporters within the general public - which is of course the line usually taken by those who defend the successes or cry at the failures of the British police. Be that as it may, the image was more powerful than the little-known reality and it fitted into a new image of nazi Germany as the exemplar of out-of-control all-powerful state violence: an evil model to be quenched by superior British democratic institutions.

The work of the Control Commission

The experience of the British Element of the Allied Control Commission for Germany shows the extent to which senior police officers and Home Office Civil Servants genuinely believed in the superiority of the British model. During the allied occupation of Europe, many British policemen found themselves supervising the reconstruction and modification of the police institutions of their former enemies. At the same time, the image of the Gestapo - the exemplar of foreign, brutal, and antidemocratic secret police - was being constructed and accepted as the ultimate antithesis of the British criminal justice system.

Eric St Johnston was the man who later played a key role in re-shaping the governance of the British police forces in the 1960s. He spent the mid 1940s on Eisenhower's staff, as a Public Safety Officer planning the police structure for the civil administration that would run

⁸ T A Critchley *A history of police in England and Wales: 900-1966*, (London, Constable 1967).

⁹ T A Critchley *The conquest of violence : order and liberty in Britain* (London: Constable, 1970), p. 70.

¹⁰ R. Gellately *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 44.

occupied Italy and Germany.¹¹ As it happened, the structure that was imposed in Germany consisted of unitary forces on a county (*Kreis*) level - very similar to that which St Johnston suggested to the 1960 Royal Commission, which was what was imposed on the UK in the 1970s.

In Germany the British Control Commission agreed that the policy should be based on confidence in British national institutions, and two premises about the traits of German character. First, an overwhelming respect for efficiency above everything else, which led to excessive centralisation, and second, its converse, a sheep-like subordination to authority.¹² The Control Commissions agreed that the new police force should be designed as 'a body designed primarily for the service of the community by the maintenance of public order and prevention and detection of crime'.¹³ The 'correct' attitude, as fostered by British-designed three month retraining courses, was for the police to be organised along preventative rather than detective lines.¹⁴

But the Public Safety Officers, seconded from the Home Office and from British police forces, disagreed with their fellow Britons over the best way to reconstruct the German civil police force. The majority of the Commission was happy with a re-establishment of centralised police forces under a Commissioner responsible to the Interior Minister of each *Land*. To the Public Safety Branch, this was anathema. They insisted instead on an attempt to impose a British model, in which the police was 'freed from tendentious political influences from within and without'.¹⁵ This departure from existing practice was not generally popular with the Germans, who protested that this lack of 'political control' could also be described as a lack of accountability, and would produce over-mighty police chiefs. Many of the Commission agreed and pleaded with the Public Safety branch 'to make some concessions to Continental thinking', but to no avail.¹⁶ In the words of one commentator:

The British police experts were highly effective in their retraining of German police forces at the general level of uniformed men on the beat. But in the field of democratic control of the police, they succeeded more in demonstrating the

¹¹ E. St. Johnston *One Policeman's Story* (Barry Rose, Chichester, 1978) pp. 91-103.

¹² D.C. Watt *Britain Looks to Germany: British Opinion and Policy Towards Germany Since 1945* (Oswald Wolff: London, 1965), p. 71.

¹³ 'Law and Order in Vienna (Quis custodiet custodes?)' in *Austria: a monthly report and review* September 1946 pub. Allied Commission for Austria (British Element), 34-39 p. 34.

¹⁴ 'Crime in Austria' in *Austria: a monthly report and review* May 1947 pub. Allied Commission for Austria (British Element), 36-39 p. 39.

¹⁵ 'Law and Order in Vienna (Quis custodiet custodes?)' in *Austria: a monthly report and review* September 1946 pub. Allied Commission for Austria (British Element), 34-39 p. 39.

¹⁶ R. Ebsworth *Restoring Democracy in Germany: The British Contribution*. (London, Stevens and Sons, 1960), p. 178.

difficulties and dangers of the British system than in providing a substitute for those of the previous system in Germany.¹⁷

The retraining of the German police took priority for the Public Safety Branch officers. Even when the level of corruption in the Control Commission became a political scandal in London, they still gave top priority to the re-training task, rather than any attempts to stop corruption.¹⁸ The British model did not out-last the restoration of police authority to the Lander and the Federal Republic. Nevertheless, the Public Safety Officers had felt impelled to impose the British model for compelling ideological reasons despite the large political and financial cost.

National Stereotypes

I will now move on to discuss the post-war images of Germans and British that were commonplace in Britain. Norbert Elias describes an objectively existing 'national habitus': the collective difference in personal behaviour and standards between different states, which have to be defined with reference to state formation.¹⁹ Today, though, I'm concerned with subjective views of other countries. The Gestapo were the police component of a particularly deeply-set degree of stereotyping by many British people, which took two forms: that of the Germans and that of themselves.

Stereotypes of Germans

In Britain, opinion after the war was inclined to be anti-German. The Nazis had after all fitted perfectly the 'preconceived patterns of thought and attitudes' of British public opinion towards things German.²⁰ When in 1944 Noel Coward sung the song after which this paper was named, many listeners complained, not realising it was a parody. Through the 1950s, reporting of Germany in the popular press 'tended to vary between the themes "foreigners are funny" and "foreigners are dangerous"'. For Germany, it was mainly the latter.²¹ D.C. Watt, writing in 1965, reluctantly conceded that: 'It must be recognised that the old stereotype of the German as ruthless, brutal and efficient in his methods and inclined to megalomania in his choice of end, has still to be thoroughly replaced.'²²

¹⁷ D C Watt p. 78.

¹⁸ J E Farquharson 'The British Occupation of Germany 1945-6: A Badly Managed Disaster Area?' in *German History* V.11, n.3 (1993) 316-338, p. 331.

¹⁹ N Elias *The Germans: Power Struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Polity, London 1996), p.2.

²⁰ Watt p. 115.

²¹ Watt p. 128.

²² Watt p. 156.

In 1962 a survey of children found that Germany was the most disliked nation and the war was the most cited reason.²³ In 1970 a survey of children found that Germany was - along with Japan, China and Russia - the most disliked country. Also, it found that 'information about Germany was sketchy and largely related to war'.²⁴ One study in 1992 drew the conclusion that in children's literature at least, there was a marked reduction in anti-German stereotyping after the late 1960s, but this brittle retreat was liable to reverse itself at any moment, as the mass culture phenomenon of 'Escape from Colditz' in the 1970s showed.²⁵ In the early 90s, British children, who were getting most of this information from television, still saw Germans as more aggressive than other nationalities.²⁶ The one thing that 8 and 9 year olds associated with 'Germans' was 'the war'.

Stereotypes of Englishness

Possibly more important than the residual prejudice against Germans is the way that British people had a tendency to see themselves. There is a long-standing re-statement of the self-image of Britain as a uniquely pacified nation and people. As Martin Weiner has shown, in the nineteenth century foreign perpetrators of violence were often sentenced to prison terms that were shorter than those given to the English.²⁷ Judges commented that they could not be blamed, since they lacked the restraint and self-control that were the peculiar characteristics of Englishmen. Weiner also points out that a supposed national propensity towards restraint, peacefulness, and self-control were seen as ways of morally justifying British global pre-eminence. If we fast forward to 1981, we find the report into the riots on Moss Side musing that: 'At one time to kick in the head somebody lying on the ground was regarded as 'un-British' as was the use of a knife in a fight.'²⁸

Here is the result of a UNESCO survey carried out in 1948.²⁹ Participants in different countries were asked to rate other countries and their own, according to their closeness to a list of assumed characteristics. I've extracted some of the answers relating to self-image. Many other characteristics have been omitted here for clarity: they included hardworking,

²³ G Jahoda 'Development of Scottish children's idea and attitudes about other countries' in *Journal of Social Psychology* v. 58, (1962) 91-108, p. 94.

²⁴ N Johnson 'Development of English Children's Concept of Germany' in *Journal of Social Psychology* v. 90 (1973) 259-267, p. 259.

²⁵ D.Balance *Anglo-German attitudes - how do we see each other?: The changing attitudes of young people in Britain and Germany : a British German seminar on 28 and 29 November, 1991 at Goethe-Institut London.* (Goethe-Institut London: London, 1992).pp. 8, 19-20.

²⁶ M Barret and J Short 'Images of European People' in *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* v. 10 339 -363, p. 349.

²⁷ MJ Weiner 'The sad story of George Hall: adultery, murder, and the politics of mercy in mid-Victorian England' in *Social History* v. 24, n. 2 May 1999, 174-195, pp. 190-191.

²⁸ 'Report of the Moss Side Enquiry Panel to the leader of the Greater Manchester Council', 1981, p. 37.

²⁹ W Buchanan 'Stereotypes and tensions as revealed by the UNESCO International Poll' in *International Social Science Bulletin* Vol.3 (1951), 515-528, pp. 519-20.

intelligent, practical, conceited, generous, cruel, backward, domineering, progressive and 'impossible to characterise'. The British were most likely to pick 'peace-loving' over all the other descriptions open to them. More Britons described themselves as 'self-controlled' than did any other group.

Own nationals are: (%)	GB	US	Oz	D	Fr	It	Neth	Nor
Peace-loving	77	82	71	37	69	27	68	69
Brave	59	66	57	63	56	45	37	42
Self-controlled	44	37	26	12	12	5	36	21

After the US horror comics scare of the 1950s, that gave birth to the *Eagle*, there was a more mild uneasiness about war comics in the mid 1960s. Sociologist Nicholas Johnson carried out a content analysis of war comics - including the *Commando War Stories* that I was still buying in the 1970s and reading in the 1980s - and he drew the following conclusions about their message: 'The British and their allies are forced to retaliate, and they are thorough about it . . . All the while, however, they retain their typically British characteristics of boyishness, courage, valiance and cool daring.'³⁰ Peaceful British - forced to retaliate coolly. In 1995, British teenagers characterised their country's superiority in terms of being a safe and peaceful place, and a country of helpful friendly people.³¹

So - the defeated Nazi secret police force was the negative to the Bobby's positive: it helped to define a seemingly unique symbol of British exceptionalism, independence, civility, and internal pacification. The unarmed policeman in his quaint hat was presented as both natural consequence and major constituent of a highly consensual society, as part of what Clive's called an 'indulgent tradition'.³² The irony here is almost forgotten: the quaint Bobby's helmet, the 'tit on the head', is a descendant of the Prussian army helmet, minus the spike,

³⁰ N Johnson 'What do children learn from war comics?' in *New Society*, v. 8, (1967) 7-12, p. 9.

³¹ Rutland, Adam. (1999). 'The development of national prejudice, in-group favouritism and self-stereotypes in British children' in *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 38, 1, 55-70, pp. 63-64

³² C. Emsley 'The English Bobby: an indulgent tradition' in R. Porter (ed.) *Myths of the English* (Polity, Cambridge, 1992), pp. 114-135.

which was adopted in the many UK police forces as part of an attempt to look and thus act in a more professional manner.³³

Sometimes hyberbolic examples of postwar Gestapophobia

The view of the evil totalitarians went right to the top: In 1960, Theobald Mathew, the Director of Public Prosecutions, submitted his evidence to the Royal Commission on the Police. Rather cheekily, it was his standard speech, which started with his favourite truth-stretching claim that he directed nobody and in England there was no such thing as a public prosecution.³⁴ He went through the usual Whig evolution, about the glory of the British system being the fact that the aggrieved individual rather than the state prosecutes the vast majority of villains. The fact that by then the police were doing the prosecution was finessed in the usual way: the police are the public in uniform, with no special powers. This was one of Reith's nine principles of British police.³⁵ But at one point, this man, who was qualified as both barrister and solicitor, and the son and grandson of judges, claimed that the only alternative to the British system of police and prosecution was 'direct enforcement by the Executive Government'.³⁶ Under which system:

‘the rulers, either because they were or became tyrannical and cruel, or because they had not the goodwill and assistance of their subjects, were compelled almost inevitably to arm those officers of the law with oppressive powers and to create a more or less servile judiciary.

The culmination of this evolution can be seen in the political and secret police of the dictatorships and of the totalitarian states of modern times.’³⁷

The only evidence Mathew offered in order to explain the rationale followed by most of the rest of the world was a line from Herman Goering's evidence in Nuremburg 'defending the creation of the Gestapo': "For the consolidation of political power, the first pre-requisite was to create along new lines that instrument which at all times and in all nations is always the inner political instrument of power, namely, the police." The continental model retired defeated...

Preventing the British police from becoming like the Gestapo was a rallying cry of those who opposed centralisation: In 1963 the Association of Municipal Corporations realised that their

³³ C. Barnett *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970: a military, political and social survey* (Penguin, Harmondworth, 1970) p. 313.

³⁴ HO 272/22 ee 3.

³⁵ Reith, *British Police and the Democratic Ideal*, p. 4.

³⁶ Dictionary of National Biography; XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

³⁷ HO 272/22 ee3, p. 2.

police powers were facing eclipse from the forthcoming police bill. At a special national conference called to oppose it, it is notable that many speakers were keen to stress that centralisation meant a 'police state'.³⁸ This phrase was used six times. Not only that, but 'a Police State such as we had in Germany and other countries'.³⁹ Not only *that*, but the threat of Chief Constables behaving like a 'little Hitler' or 'forming regional dictatorship'.⁴⁰ The crescendo was reached with 'we do not want Gauleiters in our towns.'⁴¹ Anti German rhetoric was the order of the day: in this case, to no avail.

Accusing them of acting like the Gestapo was the response of some of those who suffered brutality from the 'best police in the world': It was also a good way to precipitate such an assault. In 1957 a 16 year old boy in Thurso, Scotland, got into an argument with two police officers. They appear to have taken him into an alley and hit him immediately after he called them 'Gestapo bastards'.⁴²

Conclusion

So - hopefully the various tangents I've gone off onto have sketched out a pattern, the vague outline of which tells us something about the way that the British really liked to think of themselves as non-violent and self-controlled, and consequently assigned a large place to their non-violent police in national self-justification. The angel was thrown into relief against a devil: the Gendarme, or the Gestapo agent. The result worked to further reinforce the centrality of the Great Patriotic War against the beastly Germans.

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³⁸ 'Minutes of proceedings at a conference between representatives of borough authorities to discuss the recommendations contained in the report of the Royal Commission on the Police', Wed 11th Sept 1963. Association of Municipal Corporations Archive, Birmingham University Library. pp. 2, 6, 11, 14, 15, 16

³⁹ p. 12.

⁴⁰ pp. 14, 16

⁴¹ p. 18.

⁴² The Times XXXX.