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Alternate History and Memory: A Response to Richard Evans

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ALTERNATE HISTORY AND MEMORY

Gavriel Rosenfeld

What would the field of alternate history do without its opponents? Since its recent emergence into the Western cultural and intellectual mainstream in the last generation, alternate history has garnered increasing attention in no small part due to the enduring opposition to it among many skeptical historians. By giving rise to controversy and sparking discussions such as the one printed in the pages of this bulletin, the critics of alternate history have ended up further contributing to the field's prominence. For this reason, it is safe to say that without its opponents, the field of alternate history—to paraphrase Jean Paul Sartre's flawed observations about anti-Semites' views of Jews—would have to invent them.

Fortunately, Richard Evans has spared the supporters of alternate history this demanding task by entering the fray with a long list of objections to the field. Evans raises important points in his eloquent critique of alternate history and scores a number of hits. But his overly narrow conception of the field ultimately ends up weakening the strength of his analysis.

Evans's complaint against alternate history is largely political in nature. He criticizes alternate history by identifying many of its leading practitioners as members of

what he calls the "young fogley school" of conservative British historians, such as Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts. Evans describes these historians as embracing alternate history (and its attendant valorization of chance and contingency) as part of a broader conservative assault on the tradition of historical determinism long associated with Marxist historiography. This is a valid point that Evans augments with a convincing discussion of how conservatives have misunderstood the true nature of determinism in traditional Western historiography. Yet no matter how valid his lengthy discussion of determinism may be, Evans himself exhibits signs of deterministic thinking when he effectively equates alternate history with conservative political thinking, asserting "*it is no accident* (emphasis added) . . . that so many proponents [of it] . . . have been located on the right wing of the political spectrum." Evans is correct that many conservatives have embraced alternate history; and he is convincing in showing, for example, how Niall Ferguson's speculative account of British neutrality in World War I expresses a clear conservative fantasy (in Ferguson's piece, Germany wins the Great War, thus preventing the eruption of World War II and allow-

ing Britain to preserve its empire). Yet Evans goes too far in dismissing counterfactual history as "in the end little more than a rather obvious form of wishful thinking." Here, he seems ready to throw out the allohistorical baby because conservatives allegedly poured in the bathwater.

In fact, a broader survey of postwar alternate history reveals that it is far more complex in its political valences. Numerous examples could be cited, but alternate histories on the subject of the Nazis winning World War II provide an excellent example of demonstrating alternate history's compatibility with numerous political agendas. In England the scenario of the Nazis invading, defeating, and occupying Great Britain has been explored in an exceptionally large number of novels, short stories, plays, films, television programs, and speculative essays. Some have, indeed, been conservative in their political motivations. Early postwar accounts, such as Noel Coward's 1947 play, *Peace in Our Time*, or John W. Wall's novel, *The Sound of His Horn* (both of which portray the Nazis as demonic beasts and the British as heroic resisters), for example, were clearly motivated by the conservative and highly patriotic agenda of triumphally validating the notion that Britain's

historical decision to fight on against Nazi Germany in 1940 constituted the nation's "finest hour."

Yet from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s—to cite merely one of several important phases of significant postwar allohistorical productivity—British alternate histories increasingly began to dissolve the once clear divisions between heroic Britons and demonic Germans by de-heroizing the former and de-demonizing the latter. Many works during these years portrayed the British collaborating with the Germans in occupied England, such as playwright Giles Cooper's 1964 television drama, *The Other Man* (starring Michael Caine as a collaborationist military officer overseeing a forced labor brigade in Nazi-ruled India); Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's controversial 1964 film, *It Happened Here* (which portrays a collaborationist female medic in Nazi-occupied England); playwright Philip Mackie's 1978 BBC2 television mini-series, *An Englishman's Castle* (on the collaborationist British television industry's manipulation of public opinion); and novelist Len Deighton's 1978 bestseller, *SS-GB* (on collaborationist British police detectives working with the Nazi occupiers). Notably, most of these writers stood on the left wing of the political spectrum and intended their works to critique the British status quo of the time. By the mid-1960s a highly pessimistic mood had developed within British society, rooted in the nation's increasingly obvious decline from great power status (typified by the loss of overseas colonies) and its general economic stagnation. In many ways, the alternate histories of this downcast era represented a left-wing challenge to the self-satisfied myth of the "finest hour" so beloved by conservatives.

Many other examples could be cited to illustrate how liberals, not just conservatives, have utilized alternate history for political purposes. But there is another claim made by Evans that also needs to be questioned. Near the end of his essay, Evans flatly observes that alternate history, in promoting a subjective kind of wishful thinking, "contributes nothing to our understanding of what actually did happen" in the past. This is certainly true as far as it goes. But, of course, the task of history is not merely to explain what happened. In the last two

decades, historians of memory have convincingly argued that another important task of historical scholarship is to explain how the events of the past have been perceived in collective consciousness. Alternate history may not reveal the reasons why history unfolded as it did, but it can certainly shed light on how it has been remembered.

Here again, British allohistorical accounts of a Nazi victory in World War II are significant for revealing the changing ways in which Britons have remembered the war experience. If early postwar accounts portrayed the Nazis as evil villains and the British as virtuous victims, the blurring of the line between the two in accounts since the mid-1960s reflects the gradual normalization of memory. As the Nazi experience has faded into the past, the emergence of new postwar generations and the onset of new postwar concerns have contributed to the fading horror of a Nazi wartime victory in British consciousness. Again, numerous other examples could be mentioned of other allohistorical themes that have been portrayed in other national contexts, but to repeat the obvious: alternate histories have immense value as sources enabling historians to chart the evolution of memory. Accounts of what never happened, in short, help us understand the memory of what did.

Finally, Evans's closing observations about the superiority of traditional history to alternate history can be questioned as well. Evans ends his essay by claiming that alternate history, far from liberating history from determinism, ends up "confining it in another that is more constricting" by allegedly prescribing an inevitable progression of events from a given point of divergence from the real historical record (i.e., a lost battle being won, a major political leader dying prematurely, and so forth). He thus concludes that because alternate history "removes chance and contingency from history," it disqualifies itself from serious consideration as a tool of historical analysis. "History in the end," he asserts, "is and can only really be about finding out what happened . . . and understanding and explaining it, not positing alternative courses of development or indulging in bouts of wishful thinking."

Several things are flawed about this conclusion. Not only is it unnecessarily restrictive in its definition of the proper task of histori-

cal analysis, it is also based on an overly charitable view of the diverse motives that guide conventional historians in the first place. When Evans seeks to dismiss alternate history as the politically motivated tool of conservative daydreamers, he implies that traditional historiography is more objective and less beholden to political agendas. To be sure, most historians strive for objectivity by following commonly agreed upon rules governing the use of evidence and the like. But in the last generation the profession has come to realize that the task of writing entails both a substantial degree of interpretation and various strategies of representation which are no less insulated from present day agendas, political or otherwise, than alternate history. One can see this in the traditional historical works of scholars who are also active practitioners of alternate history. To name merely one example, Niall Ferguson's traditional work of history, *The Pity of War*, contains many counterfactual observations that echo his larger theses about Britain's failure to remain neutral during World War I. It is not only conservatives, though, who have pursued political agendas in their work. A long and distinguished list of left-wing historians have been no less politically motivated in their own scholarship. To put it simply, traditional history is no less immune to potential politicization than alternate history.

In the end, of course, Evans is correct that traditional history will always remain superior in terms of explaining the past. But alternate history has its own contributions to make to the broader cause of historical understanding. Historians have yet to awaken to the potential of alternate history to shed light on historical memory. By beginning to write the history of alternate history and subjecting it to detailed empirical analysis, scholars will gradually begin to appreciate its significance as an important field of intellectual inquiry and cultural expression.

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