



[Independent Home](#) | [News](#) | [Sport](#) | [Argument](#) | [Education](#) | [Money](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Travel](#) | [Enjoyment](#)

[Home](#) > [Argument](#) > [Commentators](#)

Billy Bragg: In the shadow of extreme nationalism

The EU, for all its faults, is the ultimate guarantor of the peace the D-Day generation fought to win

08 June 2004

Tory disarray over Europe

Battle for Britain's Eurosceptic heart dominates campaigning

Blair's nightmare could become Howard's reality

Billy Bragg: In the shadow of extreme nationalism

Just when the politicians thought it was safe - Europe is back on the agenda **P**

Supporters of the England football team have taken to flying the flag of St George from their car windows. Does that make you feel a little uncomfortable? If so, you have the D-Day generation to thank for that. The victory they secured in 1945 was, ultimately, more than just the defeat of Germany. After all, that had been achieved in the First World War. The D-Day generation accomplished something that had eluded their parents. They eradicated the belligerent nationalism that had haunted Europe for 100 years.

The Nazis were the ultimate expression of this force, yet its appetites were not confined within the borders of Germany. In every country that the Nazis invaded, they found willing accomplices for their crimes against humanity. No nation was immune. Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists was formed to exploit the same emotions that fuelled Hitler's rise to power. This aggressive sense of nationalism emerged in the 19th century and fed an intense rivalry between France and Germany which exploded into war three times between 1870 and 1940.

In the first instance, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, it was left to the two belligerents to sort things out between them. The second time it happened, in 1914, much of Europe was drawn into four years of senseless slaughter. The third time, the whole world was convulsed in a bloodbath.

The peace we have enjoyed since can be traced back to the great sacrifices made on D-Day and thereafter by our armed forces. Yet they might have been in vain were it not for the concerted effort made after the war to ensure that extreme nationalism could never flare up again. Winston Churchill was one of the greatest advocates of European unity. In a speech on Europe in 1949, he called for a policy of "closer political unity ... It is said with truth that this involves some sacrifice or merger of national sovereignty". Encouraged by Churchill, the historical disputes between France and Germany were peacefully resolved, culminating in 1957, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, founding the European Union.

I had a chance to chew over this subject with some old soldiers gathered together at a local D-Day commemoration. Like many of their generation, they have a sceptical view of the EU - "You know, we are an island," they reminded me. But when I put Churchill's words to them, they conceded that, if pooling our sovereignty within the EU meant that their grandchildren would never have to go through the horrors of war, then perhaps it was a price worth paying.

Yet, for all our advances, those 19th-century ideas that got the D-Day generation into all that trouble in the first place are beginning to resurface. On Thursday, in the European and local elections, an extreme nationalist party will be wrapping itself in the Union Jack and asking for your vote.

The British National Party is led by Nick Griffin, who once wrote that the Holocaust was a "mixture of Allied wartime propaganda, extremely profitable lie and latter witch-hysteria". When challenged on this comment in 2002, he stood by his words. The BNP goes to great lengths to present itself as a respectable party, yet it is led by a man who is prepared to make excuses for the conduct of the Nazis. The fact that Nick Griffin is prepared to speak up in defence of a regime that tried to invade our country totally undermines the patriotism of the BNP.

The UK Independence Party holds very strong views on immigration, yet does not feel the need to make excuses for Hitler's Third Reich. Let no one be in any doubt that the BNP represents the people who were defending the beaches on D-Day. A vote for the party is a slap in the face to the Normandy veterans who so proudly paraded at the weekend.

The thousands of crosses at the British cemetery at Bayeux are a potent reminder of the dangers of extreme nationalism.

The voices of those who made the ultimate sacrifice echo down the years. I hear them whenever I see the flag of St George fluttering from a car window. The innocuous support of our national football team summons up the ghosts of the victims of fascism.

Perhaps only by standing together, all our flags flying, will we be able to overcome our ambivalence about the St George's flag, just as the united nations, all flags flying, overcame the Nazis in 1945. On Thursday, millions of people in Europe will vote in the European elections, some in favour of more integration, others against. The fact that we now resolve these issues together, peacefully should offer some comfort to those who still mourn the lives cut short on D-Day.

The EU, for all its faults and failures, is the ultimate guarantor of the peace that the D-Day generation fought so long and hard to win. When I go into the ballot box, I will be thinking of the old soldiers and the great sacrifices that they made on 6 June 1944. We owe it to them to participate in the democracy that they saved for us. I, for one, will be keeping faith with those who stormed the beaches by doing everything I can to kick the BNP into the dustbin of history.

Also in Commentators

Simon Henderson: Why Osama backs Bush

Joan Bakewell: My mother smacked me. It did neither of us any good

Amanda Platell: Don't fool yourself over fertility

Cole Moreton: Dad's a two-bit loser. Now if only he could be heroic, like mum...

Dom Joly: It's not that I dislike the French. They just bring me out in a rash...

[Legal](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Using our Content](#) | © 2004 Independent Digital (UK) Ltd