

What if Britain had never joined the EU in the first place?



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The Treaty of Rome, which brought into being the European Economic Community, was signed on March 25 1957 CREDIT: AP

It is March 25, 1957. The place: Rome. Gathered in the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill are ministers and officials from seven European nations, there to sign a treaty establishing the European Economic Community. As the meeting ends, the British prime minister Harold Macmillan, appointed just a few weeks earlier, shakes hands with West Germany's chancellor Konrad Adenauer. A new partnership has been forged, a momentous event for two nations that just 12 years earlier had been at war.

Except, of course, it didn't happen. The Treaty of Rome was indeed signed on March 25, 1957; but the UK was not represented at the conference that brought the EEC into being. What if we had been? Would the EU be celebrating its 60th anniversary next month as a united entity or would Britain have pulled out long ago? Or, perhaps, had we been on board from the start it would never have grown into

the unwieldy, unaccountable structure that we see today but would have remained the loose-knit trading zone we always wanted.



The Man in the High Castle, based on the novel by Philip K Dick, has proved the popularity of counter-factual entertainment CREDIT: LIANE HENTSCHER

Alternative history can be fun, if ultimately fruitless since we can never know what the consequences of taking a different course might have been. What if Henry VIII's elder brother Arthur had not died but succeeded to the Tudor throne and there had never been a Reformation in Britain? Or if Queen Victoria had not married her eldest daughter to the Prussian Crown Prince and the Kaiser had never been born? The possible consequences: no First World War, no Second World War, no Soviet Union, no Cold War, no EU. Imagining different histories has spawned a whole genre of literature, like Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. They all assume a different outcome to the Second World War, and in Roth's case that an isolationist president (Charles Lindbergh) won the 1940 election instead of Roosevelt.

On Sunday, [the BBC is to begin screening another in this field, an adaptation of Len Deighton's 1978 thriller, SS-GB](#). Underpinning the plot is the notion that we lost the Battle of Britain and the Germans occupied the country. The story is being called dystopian but it is in fact counter-factual – not a futuristic look at some ghastly descent into social breakdown but a fictional imagining of an alternative history. That does not stop a good deal of nonsense being attached to the idea. *SS-GB* is, we are told, very much in keeping “with the times”. One of the writers said that “people are scared and vulnerable, they feel under attack, they are torn because people they loved and they thought they knew, aren't doing what they consider to be the right

thing. People who they thought they could trust have affiliations elsewhere. People are driven by self-interest. So in that sense the show feels topical.”

So post-Brexit Britain is a bit like being defeated by the Germans in 1940? Now, I appreciate that the BBC is trying to sell its series and give it a contemporary resonance; but let’s get a sense of proportion. It is interesting to speculate how we would have responded had we been occupied, as happened to most of continental Europe. We like to think British resistance would have been total but plenty of people would have been prepared to work or collaborate with the enemy. Let’s not kid ourselves.

But the fact that [this country did stand alone and was never occupied is central to its national myth](#). It is, indeed, the reason why we weren’t at that meeting in Rome in 1957 – the year recently identified by the Social Market Foundation think tank as Britain’s “happiest” of the 20th century. At the time we had yet to shake off our imperial legacy. The Suez fiasco of the previous year would begin the process of decolonisation; but there was no real political momentum behind the idea of joining a continental European association until the early 1960s. By then, the French president Charles de Gaulle, sensing the disruptive impact British membership would have on the embryonic community, vetoed our application. It took 16 years for the UK to gain admittance.

So here is another alternative history: what if we had not joined at all in 1973? Imagine that we had remained an independent nation next door to a continent that was largely unified, using a single currency and with no internal borders. The received wisdom is that we would now be an economic basket case on the fringes of a prosperous superpower. After all, when we joined we were the “sick man of Europe” and now we are economically successful; so the two must be connected.

Yet there is no certainty of this. It is arguable that our economy began to recover in the 1980s because of the reforms of [the Thatcher government](#), breaking the power of the trade unions, freeing up the labour market and selling off state assets. As we prepare to leave the EU it is at least worth considering what life might have been like on the outside. For a start we would have saved billions of pounds in net contributions and been free to strike trade deals with the emerging economies of Latin American and south-east Asia. This might have been to our considerable advantage: in the years since we joined the accumulated trade deficit with EU member states is about £500 billion.



Margaret Thatcher campaigned for us to join the EEC, but might she have turned the economy around regardless? CREDIT: PA ARCHIVE/PA

One thing that was supposed to come from membership, but didn't, was the returns of national self-confidence dented by the end of empire. Being part of a supranational body, especially after the Maastricht treaty forged much closer economic and political ties, diminished our sense of independence. It was intended to, of course; but while other EU countries were content with that, the British never were. So had we stayed out we would probably have had a very good relationship with the EU – certainly better than the one we are likely to end up with when the bruising Brexit negotiations are concluded.

Counter-factual histories usually try to legitimise the way things are today by implying they could have been a lot worse had matters taken a different course. Yet where our membership of the EU is concerned, the alternative might have been preferable to the reality. There is one other oddity about this: whether in the alternative world or the real one, the Germans always end up on top. Funny that.

