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Printed in Germany

***For Esther
And the memory of
Dr Robert Richardson***

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Preface

Imagine that you're on holiday in Eastern Germany. In the rural state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, to be precise. You decide to take the car out for a day—to drive around the region you're staying in and take in the sights. Perhaps you'll discover a nice place and get out the car and have a wander; maybe have lunch and something to drink. In any case, it is a nice day and you and your companion are not in any rush to be anywhere, so you decide to go and explore.

You happen upon a small village of little more than 10 houses. It is a rather nondescript place, apart from a large wooden signpost at the side of the road at the entrance to the village. As you drive by, you notice that several people appear to be paying particular attention to the sign, so you decide to stop and take a look yourself. Perhaps this is what amounts to a tourist attraction in this village. If not, you can at least gain a better sense of your location.

Figure 0.1: Road sign, Jamel



(Photograph: Roland Geisheimer / Attenzione / DER SPIEGEL, <http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-63175.html>)

Walking around the wooden sign, you see it provides the direction and distances to the major European cities of Paris, Berlin and Vienna. Three other place names on the sign are less familiar to you: Breslau, Königsberg and Braunau am Inn. You take a few pictures, but your interest in the road sign appears to have attracted the attention of a few rather threatening looking residents, so you return to your car.

What does this this all mean?

And why open a book on British fascist discourse with a fictionalised account of a holiday in Eastern Germany?

The place names might be familiar to readers from mainland Europe, particularly those from Central or Eastern Europe, but I would imagine they will be unknown to the majority of British readers. And this speaks to the first vital issue to consider when it comes to decoding fascist discourse: context. In fact, the village of Jamel has recently attracted a significant level of attention, from journalists and others, for the way that it has apparently been taken over by neo-Nazis. Sven Krüger, a high-level member of the far-right National Democratic Party (NPD) and resident of the village, has refashioned it as “a 'nationally liberated zone' -- a neo-Nazi term for places foreigners and those of foreign descent must fear to tread”.¹ A campaign of intimidation, vandalism and low-level violence employed by Krüger and his supporters ensured that most residents were forced to move, at which point “Krüger encouraged his right-wing friends to buy the available houses”.² However, to the untrained eye, the indications of such a transformation remain under the surface.

What is the significance of the signpost at the entrance of the village? Why the inclusion of these particular place names? Breslau and Königsberg were both formerly German cities, now renamed Wrocław (and located in modern day Poland) and Kaliningrad (located in modern day Russia) respectively. They were the two largest cities

¹ Popp, Maximilian (2011) “The Village Where the Neo-Nazis Rule”, *Spiegel Online* <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/right-wing-extremism-the-village-where-the-neo-nazis-rule-a-737471.html> [consulted 16 November 2012]

² Ibid.

located in the former eastern territories of Germany—that is, the territories East of the current German border—given up as part of the territorial changes to Germany following the Second World War. But their histories are more significant to modern day neo-Nazis than that. Founded in 1255 by crusading Teutonic Knights, Königsberg was for centuries the capital of Prussia and, from 1701, the regional capital of the province East Prussia. Originally created via subduing and converting (pagan) Prussians to Catholicism, the city and wider province were later populated with ‘ethnic Germans’, only to be *de*-Germanized after the war when its inhabitants were forcibly moved to West Germany, along with around 12 million others from across the East (Judt 2007: 25). In the words of Stalin, East Prussia—including Königsberg—had been returned “to Slavdom, where it belongs” (Ibid.). Königsberg is therefore rich in significance for German neo-Nazis. What this means is that the road sign points not only to a *place*, but also to a *time*—a time/place that was *once-German*. And, from the ideological perspective of German neo-Nazis, a *better* time/place. Drawing attention to Königsberg in this way therefore functions as a kind of condensed metonym—a part for whole replacement, in which Königsberg’s imperial history and eventual loss to the then-Soviet Union stands in for wider processes of territorial expansion, contraction and de-Nazification of the East after WWII.

Breslau/Wrocław is equally rich with historic significance. Indeed, as Thum (2011: p. xv) argues:

Wrocław is a city symptomatic of the twentieth century. In this one city, perhaps, more than any other, it is possible to witness the drama of twentieth-century Europe in full. Wrocław is a looking glass through which Europe’s self-destruction becomes manifest: nationalism and provincialization, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, the destructive rage of the Second World War, Nazi fantasies of Germanization and the murder of European Jewry, the total collapse of 1945, the shifting national borders of Central Europe, the forced resettlements, and, finally, the Cold War division of the continent.

It was home to the so-called Breslau School of Anthropology at the University of Breslau from 1931 until 1945, headed by Professor Egon von Eickstedt (1892–1965). Eickstedt’s field was ‘race psychology’, and his principle contribution to science was a ‘race formula’ that “would enable the researcher to define the degree of mixtures of racial

groups in given populations. After 1939, the race experts of the Race and Settlement Main Office (RuSHA) of the SS used their own version of a 'race formula' to determine which parts of the population in the territories occupied by the Germans were to be resettled" (Klautke 2007: 26–27). His work in Breslau, on the presence and prevalence of the 'Nordic race' in the local population, therefore contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Silesia during the war—and yet he continued his work after 1945, re-establishing himself and his research team "in the Federal Republic of Germany, at the newly founded University of Mainz. Here Eickstedt became professor of anthropology in 1947" (Klautke 2007: 35). It is unclear whether these neo-Nazi sign makers were aware of Breslau's significance in 'race science', and the scientific gloss this gave to Nazi policies of ethnic cleansing ('Lebensraum'), but the example is pregnant with such possibilities.

A more conventional interpretation might involve Breslau's involvement in warfare against the Soviet Union during WWII, given that it is remembered as the last stronghold of the Third Reich holding back the Red Army. Dubbed Fortress Breslau ('Die Festung Breslau') by Hitler, it was the scene of a brutal siege that cost thousands of lives—particularly those of civilians. Breslau was not directly threatened by fighting until the summer of 1944, but by February 1945, "all of Upper Silesia and most of Lower Silesia had been occupied by Soviet troops" (Thum 2011: xxii). The city was surrounded on February 15, effectively imprisoning "between 150,000 and 250,000 civilians in the city, including tens of thousands of forced laborers, prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates" (Ibid.). Vast swathes of Breslau were destroyed, by increasingly devastating Soviet raids, Nazi demolition of the city (including an ill-considered order to create a landing strip) and through arson. The city "gradually became a graveyard. There were so many corpses that it became impossible to inter all of them in the city's cemeteries" (Thum 2011: xxvii). For 12 weeks the siege continued. General Hermann Niehoff, the commander of the fortress troops, "was not willing to surrender until Hitler had committed suicide, Berlin had fallen on May 2, and news of the Wehrmacht's capitulation talks made it to Breslau (Thum 2011: xxix). Finally, on May 6, Niehoff signed the articles of capitulation. His fanaticism, unrelenting commitment to the

'strategy of self-destruction' and his lack of courage "to end a battle long after it had become senseless, cost tens of thousands of lives" (Ibid.).

The selection of these two cities—and the historic examples they invoke—is linked by a common idea, frequently present in revisionist literature: that Germans were victims of the war, and were made to suffer (disproportionately) at its end. Such revisionism is present in hard and soft forms, in mass media texts as well as in extremist propaganda. The television series *Die grosse Flucht* (The Great Flight) for example, produced by German documentary filmmaker Guido Knopp, "deals with the experiences of the German refugees who were driven from their homes in the eastern territories at the end of the Second World War" (Elm 2006: 160). The third episode of this series, titled 'Die Festung Breslau' (Fortress Breslau) appropriated "the language of the Death Marches endured by concentration camp victims by presenting the flight of German civilians from the approaching Russian army as 'the death march from Breslau' (der Todesmarsch von Breslau)" (Ibid.). In such a social and cultural context, where "the discourse on 'German suffering' [...] has gained a new prominence in German public debate", the narratives of what Breslau and Königsberg signify are hiding below the surface (Ibid.).

Braunau am Inn, finally, is the birthplace of Adolf Hitler. Which rather speaks for itself.

The sign therefore achieves a great deal, but only for those who can read the codes: it points to the time/place of a past Germany, an expanded German empire and implicitly signals the breadth of lands that neo-Nazis still consider to be rightly Germanic—from Königsberg in the East to Braunau am Inn in the South West. It indexes significant moments in the story of a National Socialist—Nazi—Germany and, specifically, the sacrifice that thousands of German soldiers and civilians paid in defending the Third Reich, fighting to the last, even after hope of victory was lost. By pointing out the direction and distance to his place of birth, it signals a reverence for Adolf Hitler and so indexes the continued importance of him and his ideas to contemporary neo-Nazis. It does all this, and more, and yet on first examination it is just

a road sign, whose ostensible function is to mark the direction and distance to other settlements.

The road sign is therefore an exemplary demonstration of the difference between denoted and connoted meaning—the difference between surface and depth, between what is there to be ‘read off’ and what requires additional decoding, contextualisation and analysis. Once decoded, some of the connoted meanings of this sign are relatively uncontentious. Hitler’s place of birth, for example, is a town of around only 16,000 inhabitants and so signing such a small place, located 855KM away, is rather eccentric. Consequently, few would argue against the conclusion that this town is included on this road sign as an act of veneration. However, other connoted meanings are debatable, undetermined and less fixed, or else the signs have more than one meaning—what is known as a *polysemic* sign. The case of Königsberg on the road sign is a case in point. (Perhaps the road sign is simply old, and the name hasn’t been updated since the city’s name was changed?) Ultimately, there is no textual or linguistic meaning outside of usage—outside of context. And so, in examples where the meanings are unclear or open to discussion, it is necessary to turn to context—to contexts of production (speaker/writer histories and motivations) and contexts of consumption (the other names on the sign; Jamel; East Germany; the ‘here and now’)—to ‘unriddle’ a sign’s possible meanings. It is the combination of the three place names—Breslau, Königsberg and Braunau am Inn—in this particular place at this particular time that indicate a neo-Nazi political act: an act of political defiance; an act which claims the public space and declares it a ‘nationally liberated zone’. And still, to some, it could just be read as ‘a road sign’.

The road sign serves as a reminder that political movements utilise coded symbols of various forms to communicate—like a dog whistle—in ways imperceptible to the untrained eye and ear. This use of coded, vague and euphemistic discourse is perhaps especially functional for fascist and neo-Nazi movements, given the post-war taboos on the open expression of extreme right-wing ideologies. The remainder of this book explores this argument in greater depth,

through examining both continuity and change in British fascist discourse over the past 100 years, and their relations to social contexts.