

# The birth and development of a factoid, 2013–17: the invention of history in the Scottish independence debate

Dr Gordon J Barclay

## Introduction

The growth of ‘alternative facts’ in public discourse during the UK Brexit campaign and then in the 2016 US Presidential election is the subject of much public debate, and now of more academic [research](#). This paper records my own encounter with ‘fake news’ in the period March 2013 to October 2017: the creation of a factoid – ‘*an item of unreliable information that is reported and repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact*’ – its deployment and its elaboration in the online debate about Scottish independence.

I became interested in this particular factoid because it was my own research, published in April 2013, in my book, *If Hitler comes: preparing for invasion: Scotland 1940* (Birlinn), that was distorted to create it, and because I was widely publicised as being its source. The book set out the results of five years of archival and field research into what was built, by whom, and why, to defend Scotland in the face of an expected German invasion in 1940.

The factoid is one of three military-historical ‘facts’ that were used frequently in arguments in favour of Scottish independence in the run-up to the referendum in September 2014. All three were deployed to demonstrate that a variant of the British state, ‘England’, ‘the English’, Westminster/‘Westminster’, ‘Churchill’ (in relation to two of the ‘facts’), or an anonymous ‘they’, were responsible for betraying or sacrificing Scots or Scotland. These ‘sacrifices’ were then used in debate by a sub-set of the pro-independence lobby that seems to believe that its case is strengthened by demonstrating Scottish victimhood and grievance.

The first of these ‘facts’ is the supposedly disproportionately high death-toll of Scots in the armed forces in the First World War. The high numbers published by Ferguson<sup>1</sup> and Devine<sup>2</sup>, although now largely [discounted](#)<sup>3</sup>, continue to be quoted by both the [right](#) and the [left](#). The second is the surrender of the 51st Highland Division at St Valery on 12 June 1940: posts on social media show a widespread belief in a number of ‘facts’ or assertions, which are either untrue or (in the case of the last in the list) untrue to the best of my belief: that no plans were made to evacuate the division; that the 51st was made up wholly of Scots; that the 51st formed the rear-guard of the British Expeditionary Force, and/or part of the perimeter defence of the Dunkirk evacuation; that it was sacrificed to allow ‘the cowardly English’ to escape; or that it was abandoned because Churchill hated

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pity of War*, 1998

<sup>2</sup> *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000*, 2000

<sup>3</sup> The linked post provides a summary of the argument, and there is also a useful comment noting losses by battalion.

the Scots and/or that Scottish soldiers were considered expendable by him or by others. Such statements about the 51st and Dunkirk were particularly prominent in posts on social media after the release of Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk* in the summer of 2017.

The third is the subject of this paper: the accusation that in 1940 General Ironside, Churchill, or a vague set of 'English'/'others' were prepared to 'abandon' or 'sacrifice' Scotland, or to use the country as a 'bargaining chip' in some way, to protect England, in the event of a German invasion.

My aim in writing this paper has not been to consider the pros and cons of Scottish independence, on which I am now personally undecided, but to look at an aspect of nationalist discourse, which seems to me to discredit the cause it seeks to support.

## The facts, May to September 1940

In my book, *If Hitler comes...*, I set out the background to the defence of Scotland in 1940. In May–September of that year, after the fall of Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, Britain was the last remaining combatant democracy in Europe, standing with its dominions and colonies against Nazi Germany, allied at that time with the Soviet Union. The British Army had left behind most of its tanks, artillery and transport at Dunkirk and the other northern French evacuation ports. In the face of what seemed an imminent invasion, it was decided that the only way to slow down the highly mobile German Army was to place the poorly-equipped and relatively immobile British forces behind obstacles on Britain's beaches and on inland 'stop-lines'. Although it was expected that the main thrust of a German invasion would fall on the east or south coasts of England, across the short Channel crossing, defensive preparations were made along the whole length of the British east coast, right up to Caithness, and on the Orkney and Shetland archipelagos. The vital importance of the Scapa Flow naval anchorage in Orkney meant that the north developed particularly strong defences. While there were stop-lines all the way down the Scottish east coast to stop or slow German advances from landing beaches, there was no plan to 'abandon' or 'sacrifice' Scotland.

Germany deliberately fostered the belief that the relatively large forces they had stationed in Norway were poised to fall on mainland Scotland or the northern isles. In planning Operation Sealion, the invasion aimed at the coast of south-east England, Germany made provision for naval movements and so on, that would give the impression of such a northern invasion, to draw British forces northwards.<sup>4</sup> British war planners did not believe that the main attack would come from Norway, reckoning, correctly, that such an invasion could only practically come by the shortest, Channel, crossing. On 5 July 1940, when intelligence indications of an attack from Norway were at their greatest, General Ironside, Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, wrote in his private diary:

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<sup>4</sup> Basil Collier, *The Defence of the United Kingdom*, 1957, p. 179

*Everything seems to point to the Germans starting something from Norway and the Baltic against Iceland, the Shetlands or perhaps Scotland. I have only the troops necessary for the barest defence there and cannot send any of my reserves up to the north, for that will be the thing that the Germans will want me to do. I shall have screams from Scotland to go and save them, but I shall have to try to resist that, or I shall not have the people ready in the south for the main thrust.*<sup>5</sup>

Despite these concerns, he *did* in fact respond to the perceived German threat to Scotland: eight days later, on 13 July, he added the 5th Infantry Division, the re-forming third of the 51st Highland Division that had not been captured at St Valery, and a battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment (35 tanks) to Scotland's garrison. It should be noted, for consideration below, that this information was on the same page of my book (p. 50), nine lines below the end of the quotation from Ironside's diary entry.

It is very clear that in his diary entry Ironside meant that Scotland, like all parts of the UK away from the south-east, would have to fight with the resources already allocated; that all military planners expected any attack on Scotland to be a feint, intended to draw both the army and RAF away from the south-east before the main German attack there; and that he did not intend to fall into such a German trap. But he tried to cover all the bases by sending reinforcements.

British fears of a German invasion remained high all summer, with a peak period of concern in the first few days of September. It was not until the autumn that the chances of an invasion were seen to have receded. The building of defences and the training and re-arming of the army went on apace over the winter, and by the spring, Britain was effectively invulnerable to invasion. For reasons I explore in my book, defensive preparations went on well into 1942. Scotland was always as well-defended as resources permitted, and the important naval bases, ports, industrial manufacturing, shipbuilding and mineral resources were too important to leave exposed.

## The factoid

My book, *If Hitler comes...*, was formally published on 10 April 2013. I received my pre-publication copies on Monday 25 March. I did not become aware until a few weeks later that just *before* publication two articles had been published, on Sunday 24 and Monday 25 March, about my research. A press release had been sent out by the publisher, but it contained nothing that might have led to the problems with the two articles set out below. I remain unaware of how my text was accessed.

### The Mail on Sunday

The first article was in the Scottish edition of the *Mail on Sunday*. The article was in three parts, one of which, about Nazi sympathisers in Scotland in 1940, is not relevant to my argument. The other two were a re-statement of Ironside's diary entry, already given,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Ironside Diaries 1937–1940*, (1962), p. 5

and, more problematically, a misleading extrapolation which should have been contradicted by the Ironside diary extract. Unfortunately, the extrapolation came first, the facts second. Let us look at how matters were dealt with. The headline of the *Mail on Sunday* piece was:

***How Churchill's aide planned to give up Scotland if the Germans invaded Britain***

The words I underline are not a reasonable interpretation of my research – being unable to reinforce Scotland is a far cry from giving it up – but it sets the reader's expectations for what follows. The headline, '**Churchill's aide did not plan to reinforce Scotland because he feared falling into a German trap, but he did actually reinforce it 8 days later**', would be a more accurate, if less 'newsworthy' headline. The article begins (my emphasis):

*It has gone down in history as Britain's finest hour, with the nation pulling together to defeat the Nazi menace.*

*However, it has emerged that London **planned to abandon Scotland if Hitler invaded our shores.***

In these two single-sentence paragraphs, an expression of the joint history of the countries of the UK in the war, common currency during the referendum campaign, is stated first, and then undermined by the second paragraph. The statement in bold does not appear in the book, and is not a reasonable interpretation of what does. Furthermore, because Ironside's diary, as quoted in the article, was published in 1962, the idea that it had just 'emerged' is laughable. Then:

*An extraordinary new account of the Second World War shows that 'screams from Scotland' were to be ignored and that England would receive 'total priority' in the event of a German invasion...*

The Ironside diary entry 'screams...' is quoted out of context and the word 'ignored' carries a greater emotional weight than 'resisted', which is what Ironside wrote. The expression 'total priority' is quoted from David Newbold's 1988 PhD thesis on British war planning,<sup>6</sup> and is his expression, not that of a contemporary personality, as seems to me to be implied. The article in the *Mail on Sunday* continued (after a paragraph largely about Nazi sympathisers; my emphasis):

*Historian Gordon Barclay has examined declassified documents to shed new light on Scotland's wartime role. He showed that Field Marshall Sir Edmund Ironside, the man Churchill chose to mastermind Britain's defences, **believed Scotland would have to be sacrificed in the event of an invasion.***

The highlighted statement does not appear in the book and is not a reasonable interpretation of my research – resisting demands for reinforcements does not equate to

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<sup>6</sup> David J Newbold 1988 *British Planning and Preparations to Resist Invasion on Land*, September 1939 – September 1940, p. 249.

'sacrifice'. While I did examine documents declassified 20 or more years before, the inference that they had shed this particular 'light' is misleading; also, as noted above, the Ironside diary had been put into the public domain in 1962.

The next segment of the article, after the reader has already been led astray, now provides a fuller version of Ironside's diary entry, giving the context:

*On July 5, 1940 the Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces noted: 'Everything seems to point to the Germans starting something from Norway and the Baltic against Iceland, the Shetlands or perhaps Scotland. I have only the troops necessary for the barest defence there and cannot send any of my reserves up to the north, for that will be the thing that the Germans will want me to do. I shall have screams from Scotland to go and save them, but I shall have to try to resist that, or I shall not have the people ready in the south for the main thrust'.*

That is, and as noted already, Scotland was not to be 'abandoned' or 'sacrificed'; rather, Ironside did not intend to fall for a German trap to move his reserves from the south-east corner of England, where the main invasion was expected; *there would have been no point defending Scotland successfully if the whole of the UK was to fall a few days later.* As noted above, on the same page of my book as the diary quotation, the information was given that Ironside *did* in fact significantly reinforce the defences of Scotland, on 13 July (see above). This information was, however, ignored in the creation of the 'abandonment' narrative. The article resumes:

*Blaming the limited resources available to him, Field Marshall Ironside insisted that 'England should receive total priority for defence'. And Churchill concurred, noting: 'The sovereign importance of London and the narrowness of the seas in this quarter make the Southern theatre where the greatest precautions must be taken'.*

The 'total priority' quote, as already noted, is not from Ironside, but Newbold's 1988 thesis. The inclusion of the Churchill quotation is grossly misleading – the 'sovereign importance' statement was made in the context of an argument between Ironside and Churchill about whether the eastern or southern coast of England (that is East Anglia vs Kent/Sussex) was at greater risk of invasion, and had nothing whatsoever to do with the argument about Scotland. The quotation is indeed in my book, but it occurs on p. 53, four pages after the 'screams from Scotland' and 'total priority' quotations (p. 49), and in a very different context.

By the time the reader of the newspaper article reaches the fuller section of the diary, which might give context, the headline and the first section of the text have already told the reader that Scotland was going to be 'abandoned' or 'sacrificed'. The partial explanation of what was actually going on comes too late; the fact that, despite his concerns, Ironside more than doubled Scotland's garrison a few days later, is not included at all. The 'abandonment' theme is then pushed home again in the last paragraph quoted above, associating Ironside with words he never spoke, and quoting Churchill's words about something completely unrelated.

# How Churchill's aide planned to give up Scotland if the Germans invaded Britain

By Marc Horne

IT has gone down in history as Britain's finest hour, with the nation pulling together to defeat the Nazi menace.

However, it has emerged that London planned to abandon Scotland if Hitler invaded our shores.

An extraordinary new account of the Second World War shows that 'screams from Scotland' were to be ignored and that England would receive 'total priority' in the event of a German invasion.

The book, *If Hitler Comes*, exposes a prominent Scottish MP's membership of a secret far-Right group and suggests Angus was highlighted as a hotbed of pro-Nazi traitors.

Historian Gordon Barclay has examined declassified documents to shed new light on Scotland's wartime role. He showed that Field Marshal Sir Edmund Ironside, the man Churchill chose to mastermind Britain's defences, believed Scotland



**CHURCHILL'S MASTERMIND:**  
Field Marshal Sir Edmund Ironside

make the South theatre where the greatest precautions must be taken.'

An official report suggests Edinburgh residents had expressed alarm that their safety was not considered to be a priority. It states: 'A rumour in Edinburgh last night said the best guns had been transferred to England. As a result, faith in our defences is becoming undermined.'

Mr Barclay claims Angus was feared to have become infiltrated by 'fifth columnist' traitors.

He said: 'Montrose's MP, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kerr, was a member of the Right Club, a secret society founded by Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay, Unionist MP for Peeblesshire. The sons of the Duke of Montrose were also active in extreme Right-wing politics, while the Montrose Standard had welcomed a violently pro-Nazi lecture in the town in January 1939 as "one of the most stimulating addresses".'

The author concludes: 'It seemed certain to most people that within Britain a fifth column of Nazi sympathisers and agents was actively working to sabotage military sites and to aid the invasion forces.'

Capt Ramsay gained the distinction of being the only parliamentarian interned during the war because of his fascist sympathies.

*If Hitler Comes* will be published by Birlinn next month.

**'I've only got troops for barest defence up there'**

would have to be sacrificed in the event of an invasion.

On July 5, 1940, the Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces noted: 'Everything seems to point to the Germans starting something from Norway and the Baltic against Iceland, the Shetlands or perhaps Scotland.'

'I only have the troops necessary for the barest defence there and cannot send any of my reserves up to the North, for that will be the thing the Germans will want me to do.'

'I shall have screams from Scotland to go and save them, but I shall have to try to resist that, or I shall not have the people ready in the South for the main thrust.'

Blaming the limited resources available to him, Field Marshal Ironside insisted that 'England should receive total priority for defence'. And Churchill concurred, noting: 'The sovereign importance of London and the narrowness of the seas in this quarter

# Secret plan to let Nazis take Scotland

SCOTLAND would have been abandoned to the Germans in the event of a Second World War invasion, according to new research.

Military commanders in London were prepared to ignore "screams from Scotland" in order to give England "total priority".

The revelation is made in a book, *If Hitler Comes*, which also exposes a prominent Scottish MP's membership of a secret far-right group and suggests that the county of Angus was a hotbed of pro-Nazi traitors.

Historian Gordon Barclay has examined declassified documents to shed new light on Scotland's wartime role.

He discovered that Field Marshal Sir Edmund Ironside, the man Churchill chose to mastermind Britain's defences, believed Scotland would have to be sacrificed to a Nazi invasion.

On July 5, 1940, the Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces noted: "Everything seems to point to the Germans starting something from Norway and the Baltic against Iceland, the Shetlands or perhaps Scotland."

"I only have the troops necessary for the barest defence there and cannot send any of my reserves up to the North,

By **Rod Mills**  
Chief Reporter

for that will be the thing the Germans will want me to do. I shall have screams from Scotland to go and save them, but I shall have to try to resist that, or I shall not have the people ready in the South for the main thrust."

Blaming the limited resources available to him, Field Marshal Ironside insisted that "England should receive total priority for defence". Churchill shared these views, the book claims.

Mr Barclay also claims Angus was infiltrated by "fifth columnist" traitors. He said: "Montrose's MP, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kerr, was a member of the Right Club, a secret society founded by Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay, Unionist MP for Peeblesshire."

"The sons of the Duke of Montrose were also active in extreme Right-wing politics, while the Montrose Standard had welcomed a violently pro-Nazi lecture in the town in January 1939 as 'one of the most stimulating addresses'."

Captain Ramsay was the only parliamentarian to be interned during the war because of fascist sympathies.

● *If Hitler Comes* will be published by Birlinn next month.



Field Marshal Ironside

Scan of a cutting of the *Daily Express* article from Monday 25 March 2013.

The *Daily Express*

On the day after, Monday 25 March 2013, the story was picked up by the Scottish edition *Daily Express*. It was this version of the story that was most widely posted in the first year of its life, as a scan of the original print article. The text seems to be based closely on the *Mail on Sunday* piece, with changes of emphasis that in my view made the picture seem even worse. The headline is even more misleading than the *Mail's*:

## ***Secret plan to let Nazis take Scotland***

There was never any intention 'to let [the] Nazis take Scotland'. The first two paragraphs, setting up and knocking down the 'finest hour' narrative are omitted and we move immediately onto (my emphasis):

***Scotland would have been abandoned to the Germans in the event of a Second World War invasion, according to new research.***

*Military commanders in London were prepared to ignore ‘screams from Scotland’ in order to give England ‘total priority’.*

The statement in bold is not a reasonable interpretation of the research. The second paragraph, as before, takes one statement out of context and quotes Newbold’s 1988 thesis on war planning, not one of the original personalities. After two further paragraphs the theme continues (my emphasis):

*He [that is, I] discovered that Field Marshall Sir Edmund Ironside, the man Churchill chose to mastermind Britain’s defences, **believed Scotland would have to be sacrificed to a Nazi invasion.***

The statement in bold is not a reasonable interpretation of the evidence. Ironside’s concerns do not in any way propose ‘sacrifice’, and his diary had been published 50 years before my book was published. The article continued with the same quotation from Ironside’s diary as had been used in the *Mail on Sunday* piece and then resumed:

*Blaming the limited resources available to him, Field Marshall Ironside insisted that ‘England should receive total priority for defence’. Churchill shared these views the book claims.*

As noted above, the ‘total priority’ quote was not by Ironside but by Newbold in his 1988 thesis.

## The initial posting of the factoid

Both newspaper stories, and their headlines, gave a very inaccurate and misleading impression of the situation in 1940. How such damaging assertions about the relationship between Scotland and the Union were allowed to pass without checking into the pages of two pro-Union newspapers is a subject of interest in its own right. Whatever the intentions of the journalists and the headline writers, the idea that Scotland was to be ‘sacrificed’ or ‘abandoned’ or betrayed in some other way, was seized upon and used online within hours of publication.

I published an account of the preliminary spread of the factoid, this new ‘discovery’ about the relationship between Scotland and England, under the title, ‘[The birth and early life of a nationalist factoid](#)’, in July 2014. I thought at that time that I had managed to reference the majority of occurrences. I now realise that this is impossible – there are far too many and small variations in terms or spelling constantly bring new examples to light – and what follows here refers only to a small proportion of its appearances, which are either typical or have some distinguishing characteristic. I have linked to posts and unless otherwise stated, all links were still live in October 2017. Note that a link may take the reader only to a page on which a particular comment has to be sought out.



What I presume to have been the *Daily Express* story (the linked image is no longer accessible) was posted at 16.03 on 25 March on Twitter by 'Traquair' with the accompanying text, '@ScotlandshireGB Could have been one of your spoofs<sup>7</sup> but sadly true. England planned to sacrifice Scotland to Nazis:(.' Users 'ScotIndyPodcast' and 'Wings Over Scotland' posted comments on Traquair's timeline asking and answering questions about the origin of the cutting, the latter [writing](#), 'Supposedly today's *Scottish Express*, p23. I have no way of accessing the SDE to verify'. Another user noted that it had also appeared in Monday's *Daily Star* (I could not find this in any online editions).

By Tuesday 26 March, Wings over Scotland had [archived](#) but apparently not posted a copy of the *Mail on Sunday* article (they used the *Daily Express* cutting, see below).

The *Daily Express* story was posted on Facebook at 22.05 on 25 March on the page for '[YES to an independent Scotland](#)' as a scan of the cutting under the text:

*Scotland would have been abandoned to the Germans in the event of second world war invasion according to new research. Military commanders in London were prepared to ignore 'screams from Scotland' in order to give England 'Total Priority'. — with better together* ['Better Together' was a phrase used by those campaigning for a 'No' vote in the referendum.]

Within a short time 507 people had 'liked' this and the post had been 'shared' 999 times (the numbers seem to fluctuate and on 20 October 2017, these figures were at 530 and 976 respectively; the most recent 'share' I could find was 25 March 2017), but the various posts under the headline were a mixture of reasonable assessments of the strategic constraints on Ironside, one or two 'Better Together' accusations of this being pretty low-grade propaganda (eg 'What a load of fabricated nationalist pish').

Significantly, many pro-independence posts asked why events 70 years before were relevant to discussions about Scotland's future. There were, however, many posts along the following lines, a type that was to become familiar (in all quotations my interventions are in square brackets):

- [The factoid is] *fairly relevant when this is apparently the heart and sole [sic] for the British nationalist jingoistic campaign...Claims of victory over the Germans in WW2 is [sic] pretty much the only 'positive' argument they have... and there is a gaping hole in it, we were going to be sacrificed in the event of invasion, take that as you will;*
- *Scotland was, is, and always shall be viewed as an expendable asset by the South;*

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<sup>7</sup> The satirical 'BBCScotlandshire' website publishes 'ludicrous, spurious and ill-conceived Scottish stories', and included a mention of the factoid: 'UKOK head Alastair Darling has accused historian Gordon Barclay of "deliberately publishing research that showed the UK didn't give a shit about Scotlandshire"'

- *Keeping things current means you stop looking at how english [sic] goverments shafted us in the past, I strongly believe its [sic] wise therefore to remember the past to stop them shafting us in the future, and that is by voting independence;*
- *the truth behind the Union.*

Given that the book would not actually be published until 10 April, the last that I quote (from 26 March) is particularly interesting (my emphasis):

- *For all you negatives & disbelievers **Read the book**. If this information is from seald [sic] records the it can only be true. I have NO doubt that the Southern end of Britain would get the lions [sic] share, they always have ever since the two countries joind [sic] in 1707. WAKE UP.*

One thread of comment assumed that as a reputable historian I would have checked my facts, so the story must be correct – the idea that my research might have been misrepresented seems to have occurred to very few.

All but a handful of the posts had been put up by 31 March 2013, with the remainder put up between 31 October and 2 November. The last post on the thread is by me, dated 15 July 2014: when preparing the first version of this article I took some time to place the facts on record on a number of sites, even long after posting had stopped.

The initial posting on 25 March led to other posts on a range of sites. The '[Secret Scotland](#)' site [inaccessible for maintenance in October & November 2017], a very useful, informative, non-political site about all sorts of forgotten and hidden places in Scotland, posted it 'for information only' and comment was limited, '*How very strange that a little bit of anti English propaganda appears as Scotland wants independence*'. I was accused, on the assumption that the article reflected my book, of being '*bonkers*'.

The *Daily Express* piece was also posted on the '[Scotland Independence Debate](#)' Facebook page on the 25th [the post, along with most content, has since been removed]; the poster claimed that he had been undecided as whether to vote 'Yes' until he had seen it, but now he realised '*Scotland needs to get away*'. The evidence of his Facebook posts suggested, however, that his mind had been made up rather earlier than this. The '[Free Scotland](#)' Facebook page repeated the post [now removed], and attracted a range of comments from '*Just another reason for indepenance*' [sic] and, more discerningly, '*this article is a load of poorly-researched shite*'.

On the day after it was published, on Tuesday 26 March 2013 the '[Wings over Scotland](#)' site reproduced an image of the previous day's *Daily Express* article under the headline, '*What's all this "we" paleface*' with the words, '*Remember how Unionists endlessly cite World War 2 as the definitive example of great British "togetherness"? Turns out they might be over-egging that one a bit*'. It prompted over 350 responses. The majority were to a greater or lesser extent off-topic; there was some sensible consideration of Ironside's options, but others used it to argue that a 'Yes' vote in the referendum was the right

choice. This post was for some time the one that was most frequently linked to by subsequent posters on social media. The site's owner, Stuart Campbell, kindly re-opened the comments on this article to allow me to post a correction.

A day later, the factoid emerged briefly on the forum for the '[Greenock Morton Football Club](#)', in the subsection, perhaps appropriately, called 'General Nonsense' (27 March 2013 11.40am): '*Ironic considering the recent Daily Express story about how Scotland was to be abandoned to the Nazis if Germany had invaded during WW2, and our soldiers used to defend England*'. I include this otherwise unremarkable occurrence because of the first detected elaboration of the original 'fact', the addition of 'our soldiers used to defend England'. There were, of course, English soldiers in Scotland, and vice versa, in 1940. Further examples of these elaborations are noted below.

These elaborations seem to reflect a particular mental process: that is, if 'x' is true, then it is permissible to increase its impact by adding 'y', which must, within the limitations of the poster's understanding, surely have led to 'x' or been the consequence of 'x'. Thus, if Scotland was to be abandoned, all Scottish soldiers would consequently have been in England, and so it is legitimate for this (completely untrue) 'fact' to be added to amplify the original statement.

A letter in the Scottish edition of the *Daily Mail*, following up on the original *Mail on Sunday* article, combined the factoid with the fate of the 51st (Highland) Division at St Valery, putting a very nationalist spin on things:

*London planned to sacrifice and abandon Scotland to the Germans should Hitler invade Scotland's shores [...] Today, the country that England was prepared to hand over to the Germans with little or no resistance is one it wishes to hang on to with its own scaremongering tactics.*

The 'little or no resistance' is an elaboration presumably by the letter's author.

The story in its initial phase was also the inspiration of a poem, 'Abandoned', on the '[Tartantights](#)' blog. These remarks come from the introduction to the poem:

*A poem which illustrates the contempt of the so-called greatest Briton [Churchill] for the people of Scotland a people he would willingly have abandoned to the Nazis to make sure England had priority in any invasion of Britain [...] This outrageous attitude to so-called union of equals shows to me how Scotland is perceived by the British establishment [...] We are viewed as expendable it really is that simple.*

This is the first occurrence of the elaboration in which Churchill is the person solely responsible for Scotland's proposed 'abandonment'. Churchill has since become the most frequently-cited bogeyman, reflecting the polarised views current about his relationship with Scotland.

On 7 April 2013, the factoid appeared in '[Political News from Scotland](#)' in a long post about Gavin Bowd's book *Fascist Scotland*. The *Daily Express* article was re-posted with commentary on 'These damning allegations'.

## A truth without need for reference, April 2013 to September 2014

As the factoid continued to turn up through 2013 and into 2014, it began to morph, from a 'fact based on a book/research by Gordon Barclay' to a 'truth without need for reference'. It appeared in an exchange about Nigel Farage, in May 2013 on a [Facebook page](#), prompting one of the most violently anti-English posts inspired by the factoid (no longer accessible, highlights only, my emphasis and asterisks, I have not marked problematic spelling):

*Its not anti English racism, its the fact your country took an unrightful rule over Scotland. Killed our people. **Then in the second world war England planned to abandon Scotland to the nazis.** Yous lied [...] oil [...] new laws in Scotland first, and as soon as we show nation pride we are apparently racists [...] thatcher [...] Long story short, your country f\*\*\*ed over the country I love, so I really don't f\*\*\*ing like you.*

On 18 July 2013 the Facebook page of '[Socialists for an Independent Scotland](#)' [accessible until October 2016 but not now], in response to a post about Northern Ireland, included, a post, '*recent book published claims that Churchill would have abandoned Scotland to the Nazi's [sic] if we had been invaded in WW2 to protect England*'. One response, 25 minutes later, affirmed that it was '*True. All true*', but without making clear the basis on which this statement was made.

The story made its second appearance on the '[Yes to an independent Scotland](#)' Facebook page on 31 October 2013. The posting, with the *Daily Express* cutting prominently displayed, linked back to the original post, and readers were encouraged to '*share this widely once again*', presumably to try to promote another round of re-postings and anti-Union comments. The covering text was new though (my emphasis):

*Often you will hear from British Nationalists that military might and the successful defence of Britain during WWII are amongst the strongest arguments to maintain London rule...However, it came to light earlier this year that not only was this not the case, it seemed Scotland was to be used as a **sacrificial bargaining chip** in the event of a successful German invasion. Please share this widely **once again**.*

The use of Scotland as a 'sacrificial bargaining chip' is a new elaboration, implying that some sort of deal was to be done with the German government to Scotland's detriment. There is, needless to say, no basis of truth in this. On 17 October 2017 a check of the post showed that at that date it had had 160 'likes', 127 'shares' and 37 comments. As before, the nature of the comments ranged widely: a fair number that said the story was rubbish (one memorably stating, '*Its [sic] a pointless article about a shite historians [sic] shite*

*opinion published in a shite newspaper'*). But a significant number of '*So nothing new then*' responses seemed to be from people whose viewpoint the story had presumably confirmed. The page manager posted a link to Birlinn's page for my book.

The factoid appeared in a discussion on '[The Tartan Army Message Board](#)' [site had ceased to respond by September 2014] on 28 November 2013 with a sneer at Churchill:

*And while our fathers and grandfather was [sic] fighting for Britain...sorry England, Churchill and his home defence chief, field marshal Ironside were planning to abandon Scotland to the fascist [sic] when Scots were defending their country. Disgusting'*

A subsequent poster wrote, '*I've got that book and off the top of my head I can't remember reading that in it*'.

It ended up being deployed in odd places. For example on 'Cable Forum; your number one cable resource' (as in Cable TV) in a thread about '[Will Scotland leave the UK?](#)'. In response to a plea that a nationalist poster 'Jimi' provide some 'actual information' about Scotland's relationship with England, Jimi responded (23 April 2014) with a re-post of the *Daily Express* article with covering text, '*Actual info, you mean like this article from the Daily Express, maybe one day you'll wake up and see the bigger picture, but I seriously doubt it tbh. Neighbours, aye right*'. The few responses were dismissive, or considered sensibly the strategic limitations faced by Ironside.

On 15 April 2014 the story reappeared in a further post on the '[Wings over Scotland](#)' site, in response to an article on post-independence defence policy. 'Arbroath 1320' wrote (15 April 2014, 17.52) '*However, if we were to [b]ring our minds back to circa 1944 [??] then we would find the M.O.D. making plans to ABANDON Scotland to Hitler and his Nazis if they invaded Scotland. I kid you not*'. He then referenced and quoted the *Express* piece.

It appeared a month later in an infographic in the May 2014 issue of '[AyeMag, the Yes Clydesdale newsletter](#)' [the [www.yesclydesdale.org](#) site has vanished] in which it was stated '*Even dear leader Churchill planned to abandon Scotland to the Nazis if they invaded..*'. A 'truth' unsupported by reference, and another sneering reference to Churchill. I wrote to the editor of 'AyeMag' and asked him if he would print a correction. He responded that, (a) he did not intend to; (b) that the item might or might not be accurate; (c) it was not attributed to my research or book; and (d) that it reflected a sentiment that was widely spread on the internet and in the press. This seems to me to the very essence of 'fake news'.

On 15 June 2014 it appeared in a formal article on a website, rather than as a quick post/re-post and comment, where perhaps a greater degree of fact-checking might have been expected. This was a piece titled '*Unionism and a sense of Déjà vu*' on the '[Newsnet](#)' website, 'an independent politics and current affairs site based in Scotland'. It appeared as, '*It has also recently been revealed through declassified documents that, had Scotland*

*been invaded by Nazi forces in the Second World War, Scotland would have been abandoned militarily by the British'. Any subtlety of argument that might have been detected in the newspaper articles has gone, and no source is given.*

The *Daily Express* cutting was re-posted on the Twitter page of ['Love Glasgow'](#) on 28 June 2014, without comment, but attracting (to 14 July) eight further posts, including, *'It doesn't surprise me though'*; *'Nothing ever changes that's why the nukes are on the Clyde. Scottish people are expendable'*; and *'Sadly true'*. When I commented, the person who had posted the cutting objected to my *'giving [him] a hard time'* instead of the journalist.

On 16 July 2014 (18.26) the factoid emerged again, on the ['Wings over Scotland'](#) site, as a comment on a post about celebrities supporting a 'No' vote in the referendum, *'Notice the veterans with signs saying: we fought together. Did anyone tell them that Churchill had drawn up plans to abandon Scotland to the nazis [sic] if they had invaded Scotland first?'* I posted a comment setting out the facts on the following day. Stuart Campbell responded that the 'factoid' and my book were just saying the same thing in less pleasant or more pleasant language – I disagreed.

In the Wordpress blog by ['Bobalot'](#) on 30 July it appeared in a fairly strongly-worded piece, ***'A country worth saving'***, in which it appeared as, *'Another interesting thing you may not know about the second world war is that they were planning to abandon Scotland to the Nazis if they invade from Norway'* (with a link to the Wings over Scotland posting on March 2013). After I made contact the author, he kindly redrafted his text to take account of my complaint and made the reason for his re-draft explicit.

On the morning of 2 August 2014 I predicted to my wife that a letter in that day's *Scotsman* about UK military 'togetherness' would draw out the factoid – and indeed on the following day in the 'Comments' section under the letter, user-name ['JethroTull'](#) wrote (linking to the original 'Wings over Scotland' posting), *'Hmm, it appears that the Daily Express, a unionist newspaper, published an article demonstrating that plans were in place to abandon Scotland, in the event of a German invasion'*. The comments below the letter seem to be no longer accessible.

As the referendum date of 18 September 2014 approached, it turned up a few times. The Twitter blogger ['Therewasacoo'](#) posted, on 23 August, for the first time I was aware of, a scan of the original *Mail on Sunday* piece on a page dedicated to the marking of the First World War, *'UKGov celebrate #WWI outbreak. #LestWeForget they planned to abandon Scotland to Nazi invasion in #WWII'*. The post was retweeted by a number of people. The comments accompanying the retweet were of the usual type: *'aye and nothing has changed'*, *'And would kick us to the kerb in a heartbeat NOW if it suited their interests'*; *'Can this be posted on every social media site and the No camps [sic] site. Might change a few idiots'*.

After the referendum on 18 September 2014 the factoid seems to have disappeared from regular discourse online, until May 2015.

## A normalised ‘truth’, 2015–17

In the last two years I have occasionally checked for and found appearances of the factoid, but usually far too late to make any sort of sensible challenge. I generally use search terms made up of combinations of the words ‘abandon’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘expendable’, ‘Scotland’, ‘invasion’, ‘Churchill’, ‘WW2’ and ‘1940’. Virtually nothing turns up now outside Twitter and Facebook, and most hits are on the former. The appearances take two forms: first, posters trying to re-start discussion of the supposed sacrifice or abandonment by reposting it (the ‘Yes to an Independent Scotland’ Facebook page has done this three times over the last four years); and second, people deploying it as a response in discussion, usually in answer to a more positive statement about the Union. One Twitter poster alone used it in this way 12 times between 21 May 2016 and 25 September 2017, frequently including the *Daily Express* cutting ([21/5/16](#); [18/1/17](#); [25/1/17](#); [22/2/17](#); [1/5/17](#); [27/7/17](#) (twice); [28/7/17](#); [27/8/17](#) (twice); [25/9/2017](#)); he had previously posted in the spring of 2014 (twice) and the autumn of 2015. The July 2017 appearances were appended to Tweets about the 51st Division at St Valery.

### The General Election of May 2015

I suspected that on-line debate in the run-up to the general election on 7 May 2015 might prompt further appearances, but the only appearance I was aware of at the time was in a comment on the [Wings Over Scotland](#) site on the election day itself, when the story appeared as:

*British plans in the event of a German invasion in WWII was [sic] to withdraw to Hadrians [sic] wall to the North and thus save the green and pleasant land. It is selfish of the Jocks to misunderstand the greater good of better together. Scotland was said to be ‘too difficult to defend’.* (username Famous 15. 10.35am)

This post is interesting for its introduction of two new amplifying ‘facts’: first, that Scotland was ‘too difficult to defend’, based presumably on the poster’s extrapolation of the supposed plan. The second is the withdrawal to Hadrian’s Wall, which many people seem to think marks the border.

This post is unusual because I was able to contribute in real-time, rather than long after the event, although it was in a much wider pool of comment and discussion about the election. I laid out the facts and spent an interesting time answering counter-responses. Some of these led on to discussion of the 51st Highland Division. I faced an increasingly [hostile response](#) as time went on. It became clear that a proportion of the contributors found unwelcome the proposition that politically-driven mythology was not history.

There had also been a post on the ‘[Alba gu bràth](#)’ page on 5 May 2015, which I only found when preparing this text. It posted the *Daily Express* article under the text:

*Better Together? ‘Screams from Scotland will be ignored’ During World War 2 (WW2), the Westminster establishment made it very clear that in the event of a*

*German invasion they would abandon Scotland **immediately** to ensure England had total priority. [My emphasis]*

The post is noticeable for the further erosion of any nuance in the original newspaper articles and the addition of 'immediately', a locally-crafted amplification. It attracted 229 'likes', 236 'shares' and 55 comments, the vast majority of which expressed either shock at this proposed betrayal, or a complete lack of surprise at this 'fact', expressed anger in few words ('Pricks', 'Total fkr'), or in one or two cases expressed disbelief. One of the last correctly noted that the importance of Scapa Flow suggested the unlikelihood of the article being true. An interesting elaboration appeared, that, '*There are no surprises in the article. Defending Scotland would have been very difficult after the Highland Divisions had been abandoned by Churchill at Dunkirk*'.

#### The Princess's 'Hitler Salute'

In July 2015 the newspaper *The Sun* published an article about a cine film showing the six-year-old Princess Elizabeth making a 'Nazi salute'. The publication of a piece in the *Herald on Sunday* newspaper prompted a discussion on the newspaper's website. A statement was made that, '*The UK government had plans to hand Scotland over to the Third Reich as part of a possible anglo-german deal that got scuppered by Soviet action*'. Now, while it is possible that this is a completely different myth, I believe it to be a development of the factoid, the newly-crafted element being the '*anglo-german deal*', a further elaboration of the '*bargaining chip*' idea that had appeared in October 2013 (above). Someone robustly challenged the statement using almost the same words I would have used myself, but the discussion continued unabated about the supposed 'sacrifice' of Scotland.

#### Up to date, 2017

Ten days in October 2017, spent at my wife's bedside in hospital, waiting interminably for things to happen, offered opportunities to find and characterise its more recent occurrences. It had turned up a few times in 2016, sometimes with new embellishments, '*Of course you know that Churchill planned to abandon Scotland if the Germans landed troops in South East England?*' (my emphasis). The 'south east England' embellishment is interesting as most of the earlier comments assumed that Scotland would be abandoned *if it itself was invaded*, not if England was. A post in [January 2016](#) developed the 'deal with the Nazis' idea to its logical conclusion, in parallel with a '*the border was to be defended*' elaboration; the whole content of this post is made up:

*The Nazis were to be allowed to occupy Scotland but the border was to be defended pretty much to the last man.*

On 21 January 2017 the Facebook site '[Yes to an Independent Scotland](#)' posted the *Daily Express* cutting for the third time, under a text reading: '*Did you know that Scotland was to be abandoned in the event of a WW2 Nazi invasion?*' The page was shared 424 times; there were 129 comments: '*old news*', '*not surprised*', '*True story*', '*horseshit*', '*Yep*,



*further evidence of the similarity of the contempt Churchill and his cronies showed to Australia and Scotland,'* and so on. The re-posts attracted some comment, including an [assertion](#) that Birlinn's PR department had invented the whole thing to increase sales. A new amplifying embellishment of the 'fact' appeared in the discussion, that England's planned treachery had been revealed '*on a recent freedom of information buried for some 70 years*', which is of course completely untrue, as no such 'secret' exists. This merely reflects the poster's expectation of how such 'facts' come to light; 'it must have been so', and it is therefore legitimate to add this as an amplifying 'fact'.

Twitter has seen more prolific but more abbreviated use of the factoid, within its then 140 character limit. Searches turned up 20–30 original posts of the Factoid on Twitter in the period March 2016 until the completion of the text on 22 November 2017 (as noted above, a dozen of them by one poster), most often deployed in arguments about the nature of the relationship between Scotland and the Union. On 12 August 2017 Churchill's supposed words were 'quoted', to encapsulate the whole 'England bad, Churchill nasty man' approach, "*“England must be preserved at all costs” Winston Churchill 1941.*" I can, however, find no trace of Churchill ever having said these words.

## Conclusion

It is as well to remind ourselves what the factoid implies: in the summer of 1940, at the darkest hour in Britain's fight for survival, and facing the disappearance of liberal democracy in Europe, England was going to sacrifice Scotland to the murdering, racist, lunatics then running Germany, to save itself. It is a serious accusation, a gross insult; one that you would expect only to be made once you were sure of your facts and used carefully, not, as has happened, casually and repeatedly, and on many occasions, gleefully.

Most postings are now in media where material is current perhaps only for minutes or hours – corrections posted even a day later are far too late – the damage is done, some other gullible reader has 'liked' or reposted it and had history rewritten for them, and a feeling of grievance implanted or strengthened. In total, given the large number of re-posts recorded on some occasions, the story about Scotland being 'sacrificed' or 'abandoned' has probably been deployed, shared or referred between one and three thousand times on the internet, the majority of references accepting its essential truth. A lie can indeed travel around the world while the truth puts its boots on.

It continues to be annoying to have other people's prejudices 'proved' by what I am supposed to have written. My name now appears infrequently, unless the *Daily Express* or *Mail on Sunday* cuttings are re-posted, although they are now rarely deployed. The down-side of the factoid maturing from 'fact based on book/research by Gordon Barclay' to unreferenced 'truth' is that when it is deployed as a bare statement of 'fact', and as it develops locally-crafted elaborations, it is less easy to challenge.

In the last four years it has become a commonplace in online discourse to defend violently any 'fact' that suits your argument, no matter how much contrary evidence is presented. And clearly if a convenient 'fact' comes to hand, propounded by someone sharing your views, there seems to be no responsibility to check that what one is re-posting is true, no matter how vile it is. The reaction to my attempts to challenge the story has been mixed: silence and a refusal to engage, increasingly; a few 'not my fault, blame the journalists'; it was a 'widely spread' sentiment; and one or two pleasant exchanges – several people kindly changed posts without my asking. Some encounters are nasty and bruising, with people who quickly run out of coherent arguments when their fundamental beliefs are challenged and resort to abuse: as ['Dal Riata'](#) put it on 7 May 2015, at 21.14:

*Listen, self-proclaimed 'military expert', you're obviously here to flame and cause a ruckus, but instead, here's what you can do – stick a rocket up yer jacksie and let it fire you and your book of pish to f\*\*k out of here never to be seen again' (my asterisks)*

My book, despite supposedly being the source of this important 'truth', is now 'pish'.

A recent exchange with someone wedded utterly to the 'abandonment narrative' of the 51st Highland Division 'at Dunkirk' descended almost immediately into personal abuse from his side: *'You are an odious liar and an embarrassment to real military historians. Now piss off.'* At which point I was blocked.

In a country where the sentiment, 'we've had enough of experts' can be accepted as political wisdom, it is perhaps not surprising that an evidence-based refutation of a much-used lie will be rejected as irredeemably tainted, as coming from a 'Yoon' (ie, a Unionist) fanatic or paid stooge (for example, in relation to a post about the distortion of history by nationalists), *'Oh c'mon Gordon. This is utter claptrap. You're obviously a butcher's apron wearing unionist with a gripe against the SNP #Offensive'*. As noted above, straightforward denial when challenged, *'It was not invented'*, is becoming more common, and accusations appear quickly that anyone arguing against the use of the factoid must be, for example in one exchange, a Unionist *'pseudo historian'*, *'rewriting ... history after the facts to spare the blushes of the Empire'*, and *'employed'* to massage *'history to hide the atrocities that Westminster wants to forget'*. In this particular discussion I eventually found myself being held complicit, as a 'Unionist', in the 120,000 additional deaths reportedly caused by NHS cuts in England.

Over a few days in late March 2013 the factoid was created by people whose intentions remain unclear. The version of history they described was quickly identified as a useful weapon to be used in debate by that part of the nationalist lobby that believes its case for Scottish independence is strengthened by demonstrating Scottish victimhood and grievance. From being about a decision made by General Ironside (born in Leith) it rapidly became the decision of Churchill, of the 'English' or a series of proxies for England/the English, about which the posters have issues – the 'south', the 'Union', 'London', 'military commanders in London', the 'British'; the 'Ministry of Defence'; and 'Westminster'. As I

completed this version of the paper, the factoid developed further to include the First World War, *'It was acknowledged during the great wars that Scotland would be considered expendable should Britain [sic] be invaded'*.

A large number of pro-independence Twitter and Facebook users have asked the people posting the factoid why this supposed 'abandonment' narrative might be relevant over 70 years later, in the campaign for an independent, forward-looking Scotland; the answer they often receive is a variant on: that's how 'they' have always treated 'us'. The relevance of this to any reasoned argument in favour of Scottish independence is not clear.

The factoid has clearly entered the consciousness of people arguing from a perspective in the independence debate that relies on proving injury to Scotland at the hands of 'the English', and it is a lie that they are demonstrably unwilling to let go of. I hope that anyone who might want to dredge this nonsense up again comes across this article – it might give them pause for thought, but my experience is that it probably won't. There's certainly no sign of it going away yet.

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Comments are welcome, to: [factoid\\_2017@outlook.com](mailto:factoid_2017@outlook.com)