Prince Harry's indiscretions have been seen in the context of the Auschwitz anniversary and the failure of his elite education. His youth, his ignorance, poor parenting and a hatred of political correctness have all been offered in mitigation.

These explanations are insufficient. To leave interpretation of his conduct on that level would be to miss an opportunity to understand something fundamental about the cultural life of a post-colonial country that has never dealt with the consequences of its loss of empire.

Harry's behaviour, rather than just being part of the sub-culture of a group of toffs, raises mainstream themes. The telling mix of Nazis and colonial fantasy provides an insight into the core of the two-world-wars-and-one-world-cup mentality. That nihilistic outlook dictates that conflicts against Hitler and Hitlerism remain imaginatively close while Britain's many wars of decolonisation - particularly in Africa, Malaya, Cyprus and Aden - are to be actively forgotten.

Standing firm against Nazis comforts Brits by making them feel righteous and perennially innocent. Being forced to reckon with the ongoing consequences of imperial crimes makes them uncomfortable in equal measure.

This odd pattern has a psychological aspect. Its neurotic repetitions reveal an insidious blockage in British culture, something that helps in turn to explain the political resonance of Ukip and the BNP as well as to illuminate the xenophobia and violence that can co-exist with great compassion as long as its dusky beneficiaries remain sufficiently distant.
As the generation of 39-45 combatants dies out, we drift towards becoming an anxious nation that can’t get away from the Nazis it pluckily vanquished, or past the loss of its imperial pre-eminence.

The vanished empire is essentially unmourned. The meaning of its loss remains pending. The chronic, nagging pain of its absence feeds a melancholic attachment. This is both to nazism - the unchanging evil we need to always see ourselves as good - and to a resolutely air-brushed version of colonial history in which gunboat diplomacy was moral uplift, civilising missions were completed, the trains ran on time and the natives appreciated the value of stability.

These dream worlds are revisited compulsively. They saturate the cultural landscape of contemporary Britain. The distinctive mix of revisionist history and moral superiority offers pleasures and distractions that defer a reckoning with contemporary multiculture and postpone the inevitable issue of imperial reparation.

Some old imperial follies are being replayed in Mesopotamia. The substantive lessons of the colonial period are spurned. The history of empire is trivialised so that it becomes congruent with the playful mood of the fancy-dress party that imperial rule always was.

Notwithstanding New Labour’s sanctimonious words about the plight of Africa, this melancholia is a new and very British disease. Here, too, a contrast with Germany becomes instructive.

Scholars and activists from throughout the world gathered in Berlin recently to consider the centenary of the mass killing of the Herero people in south-west Africa, then under German colonial rule. Descendants of Lothar von Trotha, the architect of that genocidal scheme, joined the conversation, not to divert it into arid guilt, but to help in making a measure of shame productive. Understanding that episode was connected to using its history to build a more hospitable and more just Europe that would not be hostile in the face of aliens and strangers.

Caroline Elkins’s recent book Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya supplies a devastating indictment of the brutality and duplicity of British colonial rule in that country. She demonstrates the profound force of racism in shaping the operations of imperial government during the “emergency”. She then confronts the disturbing and complicated intersections and overlaps between the results of exported British democracy and the cruel practice of anti-democratic regimes animated by race-lore, ultranationalism and civilisationist cant.

In the light of these post-colonial developments, Britain is being challenged to accept a historical story that can accommodate both nazism and colonialism, that can explore their complex connections and use a sophisticated grasp of race and empire to explain them to disoriented young people like Prince Harry.

They will need to understand Britain’s colonial history in order to strengthen its contemporary multiculture. That is the best way to make “never again” the cornerstone of a more just nation where our civilisation might even be judged according to its ability to make reparation for those buried, disavowed and mystified colonial crimes.

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