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## German ambassador tells Brexiters: stop fixating on second world war

**Exclusive** UK v Germany  
view feeds Euroscepticism

**Patrick Wintour**  
Diplomatic editor

The image of Britain standing alone in the second world war against German domination has fed Euroscepticism

in the UK but does little to solve the country's, contemporary problems, the outgoing German ambassador to London has told the Guardian.

Peter Ammon described the UK's decision to leave the EU as "a tragedy" and a depressing moment, but also warned that Britain had "illusions" about Brexit. "If you have illusions about what you can negotiate, then it is very difficult. You end up in a divorce

in which you say: 'It was always your fault, and you find some example, and start a blame game,' he said.

In a vaudeville interview, Ammon, who is due to retire from Germany's diplomatic service this month after holding the posts of ambassador to Paris, Washington and London, also told the Guardian:

● Britain was likely to lose international influence as a result of Brexit.

● High levels of immigration into the UK from the EU, one of the key drivers of Brexit, were coming to an end because of higher growth in the EU.

● No offer would be available to the UK that is a halfway house between the situations of Canada and Norway.

Ammon said Britain was rightly proud of its history but some Brexiters were motivated by a sense of national identity built around Britain

standing alone in the second world war. With British cinemas full of films such as *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*, Ammon said: "History is always full of ambiguities and ups and downs, but if you focus only on how Britain stood alone in the [second world] war, how it stood against dominating Germany, well, it's a nice story, but does not solve any problem of today."

"I spoke to many of the



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## German envoy tells Brexiters: stop fixating on the war

Brexiters and many of them said they wanted to preserve a British identity and this was being lost in a thick soup of other identities. Obviously every state is defined by its history, and some define themselves by what their father did in the war, and it gives them great personal pride."

He described the perception that Germany dominated the EU as "a horrible story". He added: "When I tell people in Germany I am confronted by this narrative occasionally in public debates they say, 'This cannot be true. You are joking. This cannot be true. That is absurd.'"

Ammon said he had great confidence in Britain but feared its "influence will be diminished" after Brexit.

He also identified three concerns that needed to be addressed to prevent a breakdown in the talks, relating to the benefits of future UK free-trade deals, the Irish border and the terms of a specific UK-EU free-trade deal.

"The idea that there is in future a bonanza or a pot of gold somewhere through free-trade agreements with third parties seems fanciful," he said.



Dr Peter Ammon said the Brexit referendum result was 'a tragedy'

"The idea that you leave the customs union because the customs union would forbid you from entering separate free-trade agreements with third countries concerns me."

"What happens if, as is likely, Britain comes back from these negotiations and says, 'What I have got here is not very spectacular? What I fear is there will be a blame game for this non-success. It will be explained as 'something the Europeans have done.'"

The ambassador doubts the UK will be able to negotiate free-trade deals with countries such as South Korea that are better than those the EU currently enjoys. He also questioned how the issue of the UK's border with Ireland could be resolved if the UK were outside the customs union.

He added: "The idea Britain can pick somewhere between a free-trade deal combining elements of the Norway model and the Canada model will not work because the single market

is built on a balanced agreement with the objective of creating a level playing field."

He also questioned whether immigration levels into the UK from the EU were still a problem. "I have heard officials here say we are now at zero net migration from Europe so the issue seems to have gone. Instead people are desperate for plumbers and health service staff from eastern Europe, so from the outside, you wonder why people now worry. I would worry more about the shortage of staff."

Ammon noted that the UK's business leaders and the Labour party seemed to be moving to a similar stance on staying in the EU customs union, but said he did not detect a sea change in the British public mood on Brexit, and did not see a way for Europeans to persuade the British to rethink the decision.

"It is a delicate issue. I wish we could do something," he said. "The British people would not be happy particularly for the Germans to tell them what to do. This is a proud country, and rightly so. But the political assessment across Europe is that there would be no problem if Britain wanted to stay."

Ammon, who was ambassador during some of the talks between EU leaders and the former British prime minister David Cameron in 2015, said he thought Brexit was part of a wider, international populist revolt against politicians.