

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe  
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann  
Podcast Contribution, Author: Magalie Nanchen  
Movie: Dunkirk (2017)

## **The Spirit of Dunkirk**

### **Author:**

The 'Miracle of Dunkirk' during the Second World War and Brexit seem to be two very different events: yet they can be related. The recent movie *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan, which was first aired in 2017, revisits the famous evacuation of British troops from the French beach of Dunkirk in 1940. In the movie, two sides are depicted: that of the soldiers and that of the civilians. Throughout, the movie repeatedly takes the perspective of the soldiers. They are shown to be afraid of bombers in the air, and trapped on the beach, they desperately await rescue.

Such scenes are cross-cut with those showing the side of the civilians. Countless volunteers on their little ships cross the Channel with a mission to rescue British soldiers from the shore of Dunkirk and to bring them home safely before the German army renews the attack. Representatively a father, his son and his son's friend are shown leaving on their boat to save the soldiers. In a scene towards the end, as hundreds of little ships reach the beach of Dunkirk, the soldiers' relief is graspable. Many thousands are saved and brought safely back to Britain. At this point, the worlds of the soldiers and the civilians converge, and the rescue from Dunkirk culminates in a happy ending.

'Dunkirk' is one of the most powerful British myths of the Second World War: a myth, established shortly after the event and cherished ever since, that characteristically turned a military defeat into a moral victory, exaggerating the importance of the 'small boats' in order to celebrate the 'Dunkirk Spirit' of courage, stoicism, solidarity, and, not least, seafaring skill. While it also emphasizes the horrors of war, Nolan's film clearly endorses the Dunkirk myth, emphasizing the role of civilians and the 'little ships' in saving the soldiers.

### **Speaker:**

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe  
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann  
Podcast Contribution, Author: Magalie Nanchen  
Movie: Dunkirk (2017)

How does this war movie relate to Brexit?

**Author:**

Highlighting the core message of the movie, it obviously transmits a strong feeling of community, especially on the British side, revisiting the famous notion of 'the People's War'. The important role that civilians allegedly played in saving so many soldiers' lives is seen to form a sense of community. The film celebrates the feeling of belonging to one people and one country, thus suggesting a link to the assertion of national identity in the Brexit decision, where emotions also played a crucial role. The 'Leave' campaign very successfully tapped into such emotions. The headline of one campaign poster read

**Speaker:**

*Breaking Point – The EU has failed us all.*

**Author:**

The following slogan was added:

**Speaker:**

*'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.'*

**Author:**

The image accompanying the text was an endless stream of refugees, seemingly entering Britain. This poster epitomized not only the fear of the loss of British integrity, but also the dread of immigrants taking over the country. With Britain a member of the EU, being obliged to follow certain rules, many British people felt that their country was in danger of receiving too many immigrants. A way to control this problem would be to leave the EU and to establish domestic laws on migration, thus re-establishing the sense of community which was forged during the Second World War, when British civilians sailed out to 'bring the boys home'.

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe  
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann  
Podcast Contribution, Author: Magalie Nanchen  
Movie: Dunkirk (2017)

Dunkirk thus mobilizes a cultural myth which can be used to gloss over current faultlines and inequalities in Britain. The British Isles fight their own war, either against Nazi Germany, or against immigrants, protecting British togetherness. Crucial in all this is the feeling of community – a feeling that people may hope to resurrect by revisiting the ‘Miracle of Dunkirk’, and by severing ties with the Continent of Europe.

Director Christopher Nolan is said to have conceived the idea for *Dunkirk* in the 1990s when he sailed across the Channel, and surely there are many reasons why he took it up again in 2015, when the referendum had been on the cards for two years. Still, without denying the quality and complexity of the film, one should make allowance for a cultural and political climate, discourses about Britishness, Englishness and national identity, which decree that certain subjects are very much ‘in the air’, from whence they can be plucked by artists attuned to atmosphere. For *The Guardian’s* Rafael Behr, *Dunkirk* reveals humiliation as the spirit that drove Brexit. Many hope that what looks like defeat can yet again be turned into a moral victory.