Twitter Thread by Alex Deane



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This is the 4th instalment of #deanehistory. Back to the Second World War today, but whilst in the 2nd instalment we looked at the very end, this is the very beginning.
Captain Sigismund Payne Best was a monocle sporting British intelligence officer in both world wars.

Based in the Netherlands between the wars, he ran our spy network in Holland & was drawn into a trap by the Nazis who dangled officers supposedly representing those interested in removing / assassinating Hitler. But were really, er, Nazis.

A series of meetings took place between Best & his team & the fake plotters.

The aim was to humiliate the Brits, paint us as manipulating / abusing Dutch neutrality, & provide a pretext for saying Dutch were violating their own neutrality (claims not without some merit).

As with much good subterfuge, the Nazis played hard to get, making Best & co fret that they didn't believe that he was really an intelligence agent. We obligingly played some agreed codewords over the BBC to assure them he was.

A series of meetings took place, the location nudging closer to the German border – until finally at a café outside Venlo, right on the Dutch / German border.

With Best was Richard Stevens, a Major under official diplomatic cover at our Embassy at the Hague. Mixing NOC and official cover is a spook no no, as Mission:Impossible fans will know.

Actually the whole of our setup in the Hague was a bit daft. The British "passport office" (of spooks) was massive, even though it served a country for which Brits didn't need a visa. Maybe they were anticipating border crossing ham sandwich snatching.

Also with our spies were two Dutchmen – Dirk Klop, an intelligence officer pretending to be British, & Jan Lemmens, who did some driving for Best.

At this last meeting, 9 November 1939, on Himmler's orders, the SS ambushed & (literally) dragged the men over the border a few feet away. They shot & killed the brave Klop (who I think was the first Dutch casualty of the war). They released Lemmens in 1940. The Brits, they kept.

They weren't the first British prisoners of war – Larry Slattery (an Irishman) was shot down over Berlin the day after war was declared – but were amongst the first, & served the whole war as POWs – in Best's case, mostly in Sachenshausen, then in Buchenwald & Dachau.

Best's memoir is mostly about his warders & observations of German society. A bit like a Teddy Kennedy book that falls open to Chappaquiddick but deals with it in a page, Best pretty much skips over the Venlo Incident that made him famous. Given the blunders, understandable.

But it's a fascinating read about the peculiarities & mundanities of life as a prisoner. The everyday accommodations reached with people with whom relationships are formed, even despite their membership of objectively the worst organisation in human history, and so on.

An observation he makes that stayed with me: the Germans had unbelievable stoicism & endurance when it came to increasingly frequent & heavy bombing raids, taking to cellars etc throughout, but were utterly terrified of the lone fighter appearing from nowhere to strafe streets.

Stevens– former policeman in Imperial India & a well credentialed man– spoke fluent Arabic, German, Greek, Hindi, Russian & Malay. But he didn't speak common sense. Unbelievably, he was carrying an uncoded list of the British agents across Europe in his pocket when captured.

This episode is pretty much forgotten now, but it was quite consequential. First, Germany used it for the invasion of the neutral Netherlands.

Secondly, our network on the continent was pretty much rolled up at the end of 1939 & start of 1940, with appalling consequences for the brave people involved, & Stevens' list is a large reason why. Appalled by the episode, Churchill as PM created Special Operations Executive.

Best was plainly brave, but can hardly be said to have had "a good war." Suckered into a trap, ingloriously captured, spent the war moaning about camp dentistry, lack of tobacco & Red Cross deliveries, seemingly blind to the suffering of many prisoners, especially Jewish.

As one of the 1st prisoners, he had huge amounts of stuff delivered to him– various wardrobes etc- & talks about it at length.

(If after a Brit who writes well about concentration camps, Colin Rushton's "Spectator in Hell" about his time in Auschwitz is utterly haunting.)

Passing reference to the Venlo Incident in Muggeridge's memoirs (recommended) had me down the history wormhole online, buying Best's book & ultimately visiting Café Backus– still there– in 2017, which is why I was in, er, south Holland when the UK snap election was called.

What’s the lesson today (apart from being more on top of when elections are going to happen if you work in politics)?

I think it’s to note the smart lure. Not the snatch at the border – that had all the subtlety of Michael Bay’s “Pearl Harbor.” I mean the long con to get the Brits there – like all good slow played cons, it made the victims *want* to go further.

Best writes well & comes across as palpably decent. But in our darkest hour, we entrusted our European spy network to a man who today would turn up at a farflung airport, shocked to find the charming online bride-to-be to whom he’d sent all that money wasn’t there to meet him.