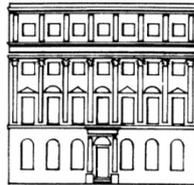


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Understanding Brexit: Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century
Conference Report

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Understanding Brexit: Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century. Conference organized by Andreas Wirsching and Martina Steber (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich-Berlin) and Andreas Gestrich (German Historical Institute London), and held at the Institute for Contemporary History, Munich on 19–20 April 2018.

In the run-up to the United Kingdom's referendum on European Union membership in June 2016, all the polls predicted a close outcome. Nevertheless, the decision by a narrow majority of voters that Britain should leave the European Union seems, with hindsight, to have taken almost everybody by surprise. Historians once again proved to be no better prophets than anyone else. The two-day conference 'Understanding Brexit: Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century', organized by the Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) Munich and the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), was a way of responding to this failure and the challenge which Brexit poses to our established narratives of twentieth-century history. In the light of Brexit, which of these narratives now need revision? How shall we in future conceive of Britain's place within European history? And what does Brexit mean for our understanding of European integration since 1945? To reflect on these questions, the conference brought together twenty-two historians from the UK and Germany, and one from the USA.

To begin with two short observations of a more general political nature: first, the mere fact that this conference took place in Germany, although its subject was Britain's place in Europe, itself contained a political message. Nobody pretended to be neutral on Brexit; all participants were like-minded in their sorrow, if not outspoken anger, at the referendum outcome and the British government's attempts to implement the vote. Second, if some conversations over the two days reflected a hope that Brexit might still be reversed, it was expressed

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The full conference programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

mainly by German scholars who live and work in the UK (or who have done so for many years). British colleagues seemed much more fatalistic in this respect.

But back to the question of why we got it so wrong. In their introduction, the conference organizers Michael Schaich (GHIL) and Martina Steber (IfZ Munich) did not hold back from sharp criticism of the profession's short-sightedness on both sides of the Channel. Steber noted the paradox that British history, which in the context of the German *Sonderweg* debate had once appeared as a positive anti-thesis, is in a sense now itself treated as a case of exceptionalism. In most universities British history and European history are separate faculties. Scholars of the former much more frequently compare their findings with US history or, since the 'imperial turn' of recent decades, even with the history of Commonwealth states, than with the history of the UK's European neighbours. In short, in the recent past British historiography has been anything *but* European. At the same time European historians have tended to describe European integration mostly as a success story of 'ever closer union'. In this Whig version of history, UK differences have at best been located within a narrative of the UK as 'the awkward partner'. So has this state of affairs caused us to misinterpret the long-term direction of British-European relations? The conference had barely got underway when Klaus H. Goetz (Munich), who chaired the first panel, asked the provocative question of whether we could find much explanation in long-term factors at all. In view of the fundamental but unforeseen political shifts of recent years, should we not emphasize short-term factors instead? Does the world nowadays follow any consistent patterns? Or is it that the rules have radically changed and we do not understand the new ones yet? It was no accident that this challenge came from one of the few political scientists attending the conference. For historians, of course, contingency must be the most depressing of all answers. Even if Goetz is right, they will continue to take long-term developments into account in identifying the more profound causes of Brexit.

The most significant long-term factor usually cited by Brexit supporters is the whole question of sovereignty. In their narrative this is closely linked to the exclusive exercise of sovereignty by national parliaments and a corresponding rejection of the increasing power of 'unelected bureaucrats in Brussels'. In developing overriding pow-

ers, so the narrative goes, the EU has unilaterally changed the 'marriage contract' that was agreed when Britain first entered the Common Market in 1973. In Munich, this narrative was represented only at the public panel held at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, where, as might have been expected, Gisela Stuart (former chair of the Vote Leave Campaign) and, less predictably, Sir Paul Lever (former ambassador to Germany) both adopted a strong anti-European stance.

At the conference sessions, however, there was little support for this narrative as an explanation for Brexit. On the contrary, in his paper Piers Ludlow (LSE) underlined the very constructive role that Britain has, on the whole, played as a member of the European Community since 1973. In listing specific British contributions to European integration, from the Single Market to its invigoration of the European Parliament, Ludlow at least complicated the 'awkward partner' narrative. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that all these achievements had been overshadowed in British public opinion by a fundamental dislike of Brussels. In fact, as Ludlow put it, the majority of British people would probably prefer to be an 'awkward partner' than a 'good European'. In a retrospective look at the debates on Britain's entry into the Common Market in the 1960s, James Ellison (Queen Mary, London) highlighted how even at that time political leaders failed to create any enthusiasm for Europe. Labour Eurosceptic Barbara Castle in 1967 famously accused the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, of trying to 'bor[e] our way into Europe'.¹

But does a lack of European idealism really make the British case exceptional in the history of European integration? Given previous experience with referendums on the European constitution, such as those that were held in France and the Netherlands in 2005, a majority of the people in other European states may, if asked, turn out to be eager to 'take back control' of national sovereignty as well. Dominik Geppert (Bonn) pointed out in his paper that in June 2016 almost every poll showed stronger Eurosceptic attitudes in Germany than in Britain. The crucial difference, Geppert argued, lay in different constitutional contexts. He sharply criticized the use of referendums as a political weapon of last resort by British prime ministers, but praised the German institution of the Federal Constitutional Court, whose

¹ Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964–70* (London, 1984), 242.

judges were able to give constructive responses to problems too complex for the simple alternative of yes or no answers.

So was there nothing special about British-European relations other than the tools used to measure Euroscepticism? Andreas Wirsching (IfZ Munich) claimed in the discussion that one long-term factor indisputably unique to the UK among European countries was its special global role in the past. Dane Kennedy (Washington) stressed that Britain joined the Common Market at around the same time as it lost its Empire, and illustrated the divisive potential of the imperial legacy for British debates on national identity. While the imperial past increasingly became a source of embarrassment for politicians and diplomats who had to issue public apologies for colonial atrocities, a large part of the electorate held the view that the Empire had actually been a good thing and was in favour of overcoming 'post-colonial guilt'.

Empire nostalgia also played a crucial part in Ben Jackson's (Oxford) diagnosis of a British national identity crisis in the last half-century. According to this analysis, the political left has lost its formerly strong 'constitutional patriotism' in the face of counter-cultural influences since the 1960s, while the political right in the same period has lost its former sensitivity to the fragility of Britain's socio-economic situation. With the success of Thatcher, the Conservatives began to believe their own marketing message of a 're-awakened nation', but ironically paid little attention to the fact that, after a decade of economic decline, the UK's comeback set in after it had joined the Common Market. Finally, after the Brexit referendum of 2016, Empire nostalgia rose to new heights with the Tory government's soundbite of an independent 'global Britain'.

The shaky foundations of this message, however, became clear during Eckart Conze's (Marburg) paper on transatlanticism. As Conze argued, at least since 1945 the UK's foreign policy had depended as much on the USA as had the foreign policy of any other Western European state. The much cited 'special relationship' was purely symbolic from the outset. In fact, during the Cold War the architecture of the US-led transatlantic security alliance was built on the premise of Britain's close integration into Western Europe. Martin Daunton (Cambridge) considered British post-war debates on monetary policy along similar lines. After decolonization, traditionalist economists had hoped to maintain the sterling area as a self-sufficient

‘non-dollar world’ and even envisaged the GBP as the lead currency of a united Europe (‘two worlds approach’), whereas less sentimental Treasury economists advocated a more or less complete currency union with the USA (‘one world approach’). As it turned out, Britain joined the Common Market after the sterling devaluation of 1967, but at the same time restored the City of London on the basis of ‘Eurodollars’ held by US banks outside the jurisdiction of the Federal Reserve. To preserve this implicit one world economy, the UK therefore had to reject any suggestion of a European currency union. ‘Global Britain’, Daunton concluded, is merely a delusion concealing Little England sentiments.

In fact, most speakers at the conference doubted whether, rhetoric aside, there was a real belief in British exceptionalism in the UK at all. Laurence Black (York) tried hard but failed to find much evidence of Euroscepticism in British popular culture. On the contrary, even the once notorious anti-German stereotypes appear to have been on the retreat for some time now. Euroscepticism, Black therefore concluded, is almost exclusively a political and economic phenomenon, not a cultural one.

It therefore seemed only natural that many papers focused on the socio-economics of Brexit. Jim Tomlinson (Glasgow) examined the economic problems of those (mainly English) de-industrialized regions where the Leave vote was higher than average. Regarding the causes of unemployment in these regions, he warned that the impact of globalization should not be overestimated. Using the steel industry as an example, he argued that the increase in productivity had, on balance, caused even more job losses. Although this claim was challenged in the following discussion, where participants referenced the dislocation of whole industries in the wake of globalization, nobody disputed Tomlinson’s overall picture of the devastating effects of unemployment in these areas. While the effects were for some time cushioned to some extent by the growth of public sector work and an increase in supplementary low-paid jobs, the cuts to in-work benefits under the austerity policy from 2010 soon destroyed this ‘new Speenhamland’.

Looking essentially at the same regions, Mike Kenny (Cambridge) confirmed the diagnosis of a resurgence in a Little England mindset. As polling shows, the more people identified themselves as English (as opposed to British), the more likely they were to have voted Leave.

Kenny underlined that the parochial sentiments of Little England communities were to a considerable degree driven by hostility towards London, and he made a good point in reminding us that England beyond London is today the last remaining part of the UK without devolved regional political representation. But this, of course, does not diminish the share of ethnic nationalism in these sentiments. As Kenny also pointed out, voters self-identifying as English were also most likely to view immigration as society's major concern.

This, finally, led the workshop to the topics of immigration and racism. Elizabeth Buettner (Amsterdam) recounted how fears of immigration had already overshadowed discussions on Britain's entry into the Common Market in the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, even Harold Wilson suggested restrictions on freedom of movement for migrants from southern Italy. Only because it had already become apparent by the mid 1970s that the fierce predictions of mass migration had not materialized did the issue fail to influence the first referendum on the UK's Common Market membership in 1975. In the last decade, however, Islamic terrorism and growing labour migration from Eastern Europe after the expansion of the EU have led to a new resurgence of xenophobic fears. Christina von Hodenberg (Queen Mary, London) gave an overview of the British tabloids' coverage of the referendum campaign that left no doubt about the lack of journalistic ethics in the way in which the pro-Brexit media exploited fears that had spread during the refugee crisis of 2015. Constant newspaper images of refugees camping on the beaches of Calais and headlines such as 'The Invaders' simultaneously stirred up ancient fears of foreign invasion associated with the Channel, as Emily Robinson (Sussex) indicated. Many participants at the conference were ultimately inclined to regard fears related to immigration as the most important single factor leading to the Brexit vote.

But this finding only lends more urgency to the question of how exclusively 'British' the Brexit vote was. There was broad recognition at the conference table that popular xenophobic moods had swung elections and referendums in the past in other European states, and could do so again in the very near future. Concerns were expressed throughout the conference that the European Union could fall apart even more in the next few years as a result of populist right-wing movements. This, in the end, was the rather disquieting bottom line of the conference—even these informative and inspiring two days in

UNDERSTANDING BREXIT

Munich, among like-minded friends could not dispel the anxiety with which many scholars of contemporary history view the fragile state of liberal democracy in Europe today.

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