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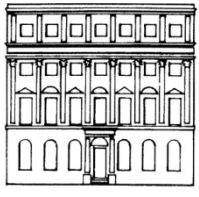

BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

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'Splendid Isolation'? Insularity in British History
Conference Report
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 40, No. 2
(November 2018), pp160-167

'Splendid Isolation'? Insularity in British History. Conference held at the Centre for British Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 4–5 May 2018. Conveners: Christiane Eisenberg (Berlin), Wencke Meteling (Marburg), Andrea Wiegeshoff (Marburg), and Hannes Ziegler (London).

'Our story centres in an island, not widely sundered from the Continent.' The well-known opening line of Winston Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* is a reference to insular geography of the sort that is frequently found when British history and identity are debated. 'Those who dwell there', Churchill continues, 'are not insensitive to any shift of power, any change of faith, or even fashion, on the mainland, but they give to every practice, every doctrine that comes to it from abroad, its own peculiar turn and imprint.'[1] Churchill's islanders are well connected and informed, yet distinct. To trace such ideas of islandness in British history was the aim of a conference held at the Centre for British Studies in Berlin and supported by the German Historical Institute London, the German Association for British Studies, and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. It was preceded by a public panel held at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, which evaluated the referendum of 23 June 2016 in the light of long-term and short-term socio-political developments on both sides of the Channel.[2]

The conference was opened by Christiane Eisenberg and Wencke Meteling, who briefly introduced the Centre for British Studies and its research aims. Subsequently Andrea Wiegeshoff and Hannes Ziegler outlined the conceptual framework of the undertaking. Wiegeshoff suggested that on the British Isles the geographical fact of inhabiting an island had been connected with historical, political, or economic

First published as 'Tagungsbericht: "Splendid Isolation"? Insularity in British History, 04.05.2018–05.05.2018 Berlin', H-Soz-Kult, 22.08.2018 <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7822>. Copyright © 2018 by H-NET, Clio-online, H-Soz-Kult, and the author, all rights reserved.

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

[1] Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, vol i: *The Birth of Britain* (London, 1956), p. viii.

[2] A recording of the panel is available at <http://voicerepublic.com/talks/abschied-vom-kontinent>, accessed 30 May 2018.

developments at least since the eighteenth century. She explained that the connection between ideology and geography, integral to the notion of insularity, has traditionally informed discourses of British national and imperial identity, a well-known recent example being David Cameron's Bloomberg Speech of January 2013.[3] Like many British politicians before him, the former Prime Minister argued that 'geographical circumstances had shaped the psychology of the islanders'. One of the historian's tasks, according to Wiegeshoff, is to question such deterministic interpretations of otherness.

Ziegler then opened up another perspective in characterizing the conference theme as closely linked to questions of transnational and global history. From this perspective, tracing discourses of insularity brings maritime exchange and networks to the fore. Ziegler listed three main lines of inquiry that the contributions to the conference would centre around. First, he said, they would trace the historical contexts of British island ideas and their manifold forms and applications. Second, 'the connection between popular and cultural representations of insularity and their visible and tangible impact on political, social, and cultural practices' would be addressed. This entailed identifying the 'groups [who] referred to the island idea to further their specific aims' with 'different degrees of impact'. Third, the idea of insularity would be investigated critically. The claim of unity inherent in many references to islandness, which obscures internal and external tensions, Ziegler said, requires deconstruction. This is particularly relevant where the island idea '[casts] silence on regions or groups perceived as different, backward and not an integral part of the "island nation"'.

The first session of the conference focused on 'Cultural Imaginations of the "Island Nation" and Competing Conceptions of National Belonging'. Ross Aldridge (Gdansk) discussed Dover and the Channel Tunnel in relation to Britain's island identity, reconstructing references to the famous cliffs of Dover in contemporary political debates and literary texts. Aldridge argued that the use of cliff and tunnel imagery in Cameron's Bloomberg Speech aligned with metaphors used in the recent campaigns of the UK Independence Party. Throughout, the cliffs of Dover served as a signifier for the sovereignty of the

[3] David Cameron, EU speech at Bloomberg, delivered 23 Jan. 2013. For the script of the speech see <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>, accessed 24 June 2018.

nation, the Channel Tunnel being identified with the threat of invasion from the Continent. The sentimental atmosphere that surrounded the cliffs of Dover in nineteenth-century literary texts and in the context of the world wars, Aldridge said, has been replaced by one of hostility. He concluded his talk with reference to Daljit Nagra's 'Look we have coming to Dover!' of 2007, a poem that reveals the migrants' perspective on the 'chalk of Britannia'. In this postcolonial literary imagination, Dover appears as a problematic and hostile arrival point.

Patrick Bahners (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) focused on insularity in the Whig interpretation of history, especially in Thomas Babington Macaulay's popular five-volume *History of England*, published from 1800 to 1859. Bahners pointed out that according to Macaulay, the British had only become 'emphatic islanders' in the thirteenth century when the Normans and Anglo-Saxons became one nation. This was the first demonstration of islandness uniting the British. The tradition of a strong parliament also went back to the thirteenth century in Macaulay's account. Along with a firm belief in the authority of the constitution, Parliament had preserved the British nation's 'island identity'. The imperative of a strong parliament and its island identity became driving forces for the nation's progression towards ever greater liberty. Underlying this account was the conviction that constitutional history was self-sufficient; in their constitution and Parliament, the British possessed the means to work out their own destiny. From this Whig perspective on British history, islandness served as an emblem for the unifying strength of constitution and Parliament.

Almuth Ebke (Mannheim) spoke on 'Changing Conceptions of Britain since 1981'. She argued that the outcome of the Brexit referendum needed to be placed in the context of decades-long discussions on belonging, migration, and national sovereignty. To exemplify this, Ebke reconstructed competing ideas of belonging in debates of Britain's recent history, most importantly in the debates of the 1960s around legislation relating to nationality which led to the Immigration Act of 1971 and the British Nationality Act of 1981. Ebke juxtaposed this with the debates on Scotland's political autonomy, in which the question of national belonging had also been at the centre of interest. The outcome of the referendum in 2016, she suggested, should be understood as part of this larger struggle to define collec-

tive belonging, a process of national soul-searching. These debates also revealed that Britain was shaped by competing notions of national belonging and that the British were not as unified as the image of the island suggested.

The keynote lecture was delivered by Julia Angster (Mannheim), who exposed a shift within the understanding of islandness that was closely linked to the experience of imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. She outlined how, by 1815, Britain had established a clear hegemony among the European powers. It possessed the strongest naval forces and dominated world trade. The British Empire was a boundless global network shaped by British concepts and values, but was not subject to tight administrative control. It was a space loosely connected by seafarers' excursions, disparate and heterogeneous in character. The Empire was built outside the realm of state relations, and the aim was to navigate the world by curiosity and to map it in a scientific manner. Its rulers were guided by a firm belief in rationality and progress. The Empire brought into being a sense of the universal validity of liberal values, and a sense that European cultures formed a superior unit compared to their global counterparts. It was this perspective that informed British conceptions of insularity before the 1840s; more than a locus, the island was the home base for a global network, the vehicle from which the Empire operated. Analysing the geographical language of the 1860s, Angster reconstructed the decline of this idea of insularity. With the disruption of the balance of powers on the European Continent, national rather than imperial interests began to govern discourses across the European lands and the British Isles. Territory rather than knowledge was now conceived as conveying global power. Angster argued that this turn from an imperial to a national rationale evinced how closely intertwined British and European histories of the time had been. Throughout her talk and in the discussion that followed, Angster emphasized that she was referring to a shift in rationale and narrative of legitimating imperial rule rather than to a shift in the practices of this rule. In this context, it was important to remember how long the narrative of the Empire as one of well-connected seafarers had served to justify and disguise the violent repression and exploitation that the 'excursions' led to.

The second session centred on conflicts between British and Irish references to islandness. James Stafford (Bielefeld) reconstructed po-

litical discourses of insularity in the Kingdom of Ireland in the decade before the French Revolution. At this time the idea emerged that Ireland could replace Britain as the centre of trade between Europe and the United States. These utopian discourses were largely informed by Ireland's economic prosperity at the time, and were furthered by the relatively long period of domestic peace that the Irish could look back on. Meanwhile, the British government, afraid of 'another American experience' even closer to their borders, was eager to bind the Kingdom of Ireland institutionally into their economic and political system, through tariffs and trading barriers.

Pamela Linden (London) spoke on 'The Fragmentation of British Jewish Identity in the Interwar Period'. She first described the arrival of Jewish migrants in Ireland and how they adapted to the island's mentality, their religious life being overseen by the Chief Rabbi in London. Linden showed how Jewish life in Ireland could only be understood within this triangle of oversight through London, traditional Jewish culture in the immigrants' home, and encounters with the native communities in Ireland. Linden exemplified this by reconstructing the case of Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, the first Chief Rabbi of Ireland, who went to Dublin during the Irish War of Independence. By following Herzog's conflicts with his successor in Belfast, Rabbi Jacob Schachter, Linden exposed the frictions between Belfast and Dublin and with their London supervisors respectively as another dimension of complexity in the Irish Jews' quest for identity.

Stuart C. Aveyard (Chichester) followed responses to the Northern Ireland conflict in the newspapers of England, Scotland, and Wales, arguing that the British had been keen to distance themselves from Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles. Aveyard showed that this hostility was noticeable in newspaper reports and cartoons from all political camps. Throughout, the British public were depicted as suffering from the conflict on the island nearby and as being forced to get involved in a senseless battle between local fundamentalists. Aveyard also reconstructed the debates on a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Altogether, the British perception of the conflicts in Northern Ireland lacked recognition of the latter as an integral part of the UK.[4]

[4] See also Stuart C. Aveyard, 'The "English Disease" is to Look for a "Solution of the Irish Problem": British Constitutional Policy in Northern Ireland after Sunningdale 1974–1976', *Contemporary British History*, 26/4 (2012), 529–

The final session of the conference juxtaposed 'islandness' and 'interconnectedness' in contemporary British politics. Benjamin Bland (London) presented an excerpt from his research on 'Nationalist Imagination and Far-Right Political Identities in Post-War Britain', thereby introducing the variety of references to islandness as a means of exclusion in contemporary political discourse. Bland analysed speeches and articles from across the conservative and far-right political camps, including the opinions of Colin Jordan, Enoch Powell, Roger Scruton, Margaret Thatcher, and John Tyndall, arguing that their references to islandness shared a common theme of fear of invasion and the destruction of the island through migration. A racially defined notion of the 'island nation' was prevalent throughout, he suggested.

Simon J. Moody (London) employed the concept of insularity to assess British defence policy and strategic planning and the British army's preparations for nuclear combat in the context of the Cold War. Moody pointed to the historic tension in British defence policy between establishing oneself as separate from the continent and seeking a connection, visible in the changing emphasis on maritime or land forces. Maritime forces were the prime concern for the longest period of British history. The 1945 decision to provide forces against the perceived Communist threat on the European Continent, therefore, marked a critical juncture in British history. The introduction of nuclear weapons signified the beginning of this new period. They seemed to be the only means of defence against Communism and the only way to ensure that the UK remained at the high table of global politics after the Empire had disintegrated. But the nuclear age also led to new fears of invasion, the island being a particularly vulnerable target for Soviet attacks. The arrival of nuclear arms gave the invasion fears of the islanders a more apocalyptic aspect.

Charlotte Lydia Riley (Southampton) provided an in-depth analysis of British newspaper reports of spending on overseas aid and development, thus disclosing the UK's post-imperial international connectedness. Riley focused on the 1960s, a decade that marked the peak of newspaper circulation in the UK. She reconstructed the characterizations of the recipients of foreign aid and their relationship

49; id., '"We couldn't do a Prague": British Government Responses to Loyalist Strikes in Northern Ireland 1974–77', *Irish Historical Studies*, 39/153 (2014), 91–111.

with the UK, but also traced the disputes about what purposes development spending should serve. Riley revealed that attitudes towards foreign aid were closely aligned with the different political camps' perceptions of the British Empire. The creation of the Ministry of Overseas Development by the Labour government of 1964 to 1970 could be regarded as the first attempt to redefine the UK's relationship with its former colonies. Although support for foreign aid spending was a distinctive feature of the Labour Party and the left-wing press, the Conservative camp occasionally also argued in its favour, perceiving it as a way of securing political stability in the receiving countries and maintaining imperial ties through continuing relationships with the former colonies.[5]

Altogether, the contributions showed how employing insularity as an analytical category can cast light on the study of Britain's past and contemporary politics and culture. Yet the final discussion also left room to problematize the analytical potential of insularity. It was noted that in present-day political discourse references to the UK as an island were dominated by Conservative and right-wing activists' attempts to redefine the nation's identity as separate from the Continent. The fact that British islandness had always formed the background for a keen interest in internationalism and connectivity, and that it had laid the foundations for a very specific British cosmopolitanism was somewhat disguised by the current political climate. Furthermore, it was argued that result of the referendum on 23 June 2016 had tinged perceptions of British insularity with an anti-European teleology. The public panel that had preceded the conference had also warned against the tendency to interpret British discourses of national identity in this teleological way. The panellists and the contributors to the conference were far from regarding the Brexit vote as an inevitable result of the islanders' search for distinctiveness. Yet the fact that contemporary developments seem to mislead contemporaries from all political camps into interpreting British discourses of islandness in a deterministic way makes it even more important for historians to interrogate insularity in British history in a critical and diverse way, perhaps even in a comparative perspective and in connection with questions of class or gender. As Churchill put

[5] See also Charlotte Lydia Riley, 'Tropical Allsorts: The Transnational Flavor of British Development Policies in Africa', *Journal of World History*, 26/4 (2016), 839–64.

it in the preface to his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*: 'Knowledge of the trials and struggles is necessary to all who would comprehend the problems, perils, challenges, and opportunities which confront us to-day.'[6]

[6] Churchill, *Birth of Britain*, p. xvii.

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