

German Historical Institute London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

James Krull:

'Very British: A German Point of View', exhibition at Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, 10 July 2019 to 8 March 2020, and at Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig, 9 June 2020 to January 2021
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 42, No. 1
(May 2020), pp40-46

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Very British: A German Point of View', exhibition at Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, 10 July 2019 to 8 March 2020, and at Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig, 9 June 2020 to January 2021; free admission.

On 31 January 2020, at 23:00 UTC, on the stroke of midnight CET, the United Kingdom left the European Union. Although the transition regulations mean that nothing much will change for UK citizens at first, Brexit Day undoubtedly represents a turning point. Since October 2019 the flip clock that greeted visitors immediately on entering the exhibition had been counting down to this date. Now it is on zero.

This temporary exhibition on the peculiarities of the German-British relationship and Britain's role in Europe after the Second World War was on display at the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn from July 2019 to March 2020, and will move to the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig in June 2020, where it will stay until January 2021. This piece is therefore both a review and a preview.

In seven thematic rooms, the presentation concentrates on the German perspective, but the British view of the FRG and the GDR is also considered. As well as the European framework mentioned above, the occupation period including the relationship between Britain and the GDR, the Royals and official state visits, the divided wartime past, economic ties, sporting rivalries, and cultural exchanges each have a room devoted to them.

A recurring topic is what the accompanying publication describes as the 'tension between vexation and fascination',¹ something that has always shaped relations between the two countries. These relations are vexatious because Britain's image of Germany was long shaped by the world wars, and the Germans' interest in Britain thus

Translated by Angela Davies (GHIL).

¹ Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *Very British: A German Point of View* (1st edn. Bonn, 2019), 5. Available in English and German.

often seemed rather one-sided, while their love was not always reciprocated; and fascinating because the Germans' soft spot for anything British was largely unaffected by this, which is still clearly visible in the cultural arena to the present day.

The chaos of Brexit, including the reactions of the EU states as an example of the alienation with which Europeans look at Britain today, makes a strong starting point. Although one has to seek out Britain's complicated path to the current situation—several attempts to join (1961 and 1967), entry into the EC in 1972, and two referendums on membership (1975 and 2016)—and initially stumbles at the exhibition's rather unintuitive arrangement here, it clearly makes the point that Britain has an ambivalent relationship with Europe. Margaret Thatcher's dress and handbag catch the eye. She long represented British obstinacy and, most memorably with her famous saying, 'I want my money back', contributed significantly to the special status that Britain had within the EU.

Another episode is closely associated with Britain's first female prime minister, one that long after the Second World War characterized Britain's suspicions of its now close allies in central Europe. In the spring of 1990, just as Germany was struggling with reunification, Thatcher invited a number of well-known British and American historians to Chequers, the country house of the UK prime ministers, to discuss the dangers posed by a reunified Germany. Extracts from a memorandum that was leaked to the press a little later, and which summed up the outcome of the meeting, can be read in the exhibition. While it took the fear of a 'Fourth Reich' seriously ('If it happened once, could it not happen again?'), it did not consider the situation to be dramatic ('Democracy was deeply rooted'). Ultimately, the trust that the Federal Republic of Germany had earned in the meantime prevailed. The fact that the Iron Lady nonetheless only reluctantly gave her blessing to German unity reveals the deeply rooted suspicion with which the British treated their former wartime enemies, even after reunification.

Taking aim at those of his fellow countrymen who, in his view, were 'pathetically stuck in a world view that's more than half a century out of date', John Cleese had, in his 1970s role as choleric hotelier Basil Fawlty, drummed into his staff 'Don't mention the war!' The exhibition shows scenes from the television series as well as evidence of Cleese's public commitment to dismantling anti-German

EXHIBITION REVIEW

prejudice. Supported by the ongoing ‘war of the towels’ between British and German holidaymakers—evidenced by the original towels (see Fig. 1)—these examples clearly illustrate German irritation at British insistence on an image of Germany shaped by the Second World War.

This, however, did little to change the fondness for the British which was deeply rooted in West German society; the fascination with which the Germans have always approached British culture can similarly be seen. Thus after an extended visit by Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip to the Federal Republic in 1965, the German tabloid *Bild* commented: ‘Your Majesty, you were wonderful!’ Not only had the royal couple made a highly symbolic stopover in Berlin, it had also been surprisingly open about its German origins—another reason why it was cheered at every stop on the way. In addition to displaying many objects originating from this state visit, the exhibition

Fig. 1: The War of the Towels



The German–British war of the towels for pool chairs was waged mainly in the tabloids. German Express: ‘Sorry! This pool chair is mine for today’; British Sun: ‘I got to the pool before the Germans (and I’ve had my breakfast!).’

Photograph credit: Stiftung Haus der Geschichte/Axel Thünker. Reprinted by permission.

shows the ‘Queen fever’ that has continued since then, with a wall full of illustrated volumes on the royals, along with the inevitable merchandising kitsch that accompanied Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s wedding in 2018.

The fascination that British culture seems to hold for Germans was not even stopped by borders and ideologies, as the example of the GDR’s beat music scene shows. Opposite a stage suit worn by the Beatle George Harrison, we can see the Music Stromers, an East Berlin beat band, banned in 1968, that emulated its role models right down to their clothing style. With well-placed scenes like this, the exhibition traces the change that took place in mutual perceptions as the world wars receded into the distance. Thus despite the idiosyncrasies and temporary imbalances in the relationship between Britain and Germany, the exhibition ultimately emphasizes the strength of the bond that had grown historically between the two countries – politically, economically, and culturally.

One object shows particularly clearly that the difficulties of a divided history can now be dealt with openly. The Coventry Dresden Cope created by artist Terry Duffy in 2017 (see Fig. 2) depicts scenes of destruction and suffering as a result of the devastating air raids on Coventry in 1940 and Dresden in 1945. Edged with the words ‘Father forgive – Vater vergib’, the cope stands not only for penance and humility in the face of the horrors inflicted on each other, but also for reconciliation, forgiveness, and a new beginning. This is shown by the fact that the bishop or priests of Coventry still wear it when officiating at memorial services. For this reason, it has to be removed from the exhibition from time to time, illustrating all the more impressively that exhibition projects such as this are themselves a sign of the deep connection that exists between Britain and Germany. That the cultural exchange between them is still so close and lively, despite the suffering and misunderstandings of the past and the confusions of the present, is one of the most important statements made by the exhibition as far as the project leader, Christian Peters, is concerned: ‘It seems inconceivable that the Germans’ fascination with Britain could be permanently damaged or even broken off.’²

This fascination can be actively experienced on the spot. Towards the end of the exhibition, visitors can listen to their favourite British

² Interview with Christian Peters, 23 Oct. 2019.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Fig. 2: Coventry–Dresden Cope



Photograph credit: Stiftung Haus der Geschichte/Axel Thünker. Reprinted by permission.

songs from the last fifty years, and at the same time vote for them in the visitors' charts (Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen appears to be at number one quite regularly). In addition to this clever and attractively implemented idea, there are further interactive displays and

media stations, the latter often containing a great deal of material. You can, for example, take a quiz that makes it possible to prepare for a meeting with the Queen – just in case. Group tours are offered, and younger visitors can explore the exhibition through a sort of treasure hunt. The accompanying publication is available in German and English, and is relatively affordable. Its structure largely follows that of the exhibition, but it distinguishes more clearly between Britain's relations with the FRG and the GDR.

Three and a half months after the exhibition's opening in the Haus der Geschichte, visitor numbers had reached six figures, which, according to Peters, is much higher than average for temporary exhibitions. What is hardly surprising though, is that the 100,000th visitor was, appropriately, a British woman. On strolling through the exhibition, one often catches snatches of English-language conversations. As all the explanatory texts and media stations are in both English and German, the exhibition obviously also attracts British visitors.

A visit to this exhibition is worthwhile. One cannot, however, help but notice that it seems to be 'Very English' rather than 'Very British' and that, beyond an understandable focus on England, little attention is paid, for example, to the sometimes close connections between the Germans and Scotland. Furthermore, the presentation of the British perspective omits the fact that the German fascination was not always unrequited, especially since there already are thematic excursions into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After all, it was not in vain that Byron praised the 'hills all rich with blossom'd trees' along the Rhine and the 'charm of this enchanted ground'.³

The guestbook is full of German and English nostalgia for certain episodes of a shared history, reminders of hospitality received, and promises of future ties. But equally visible is the uncertainty which is fuelling the current confusion about future hurdles. It remains to be seen to what extent the exhibition will be adjusted again before it opens in Leipzig, that is, whether the countdown will remain at zero, or whether the clock will start counting the time since Brexit. Either way, anyone who has visited the exhibition in Bonn will still have the

³ George Gordon Byron, *Poetry of Byron: Chosen and Arranged by Mathew Arnold* (London, 1881), 89–90, online at <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001023314>>, accessed 6 Jan. 2020.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

echoes of its loud ticking, audible in every room, in their ears. Once again, it makes clear how up-to-date the subject of the exhibition is, and how fragile German-British relations can still sometimes appear.

JAMES KRULL studied history at the universities of Bonn and St Andrews. He is currently curating an exhibition for the Lernort Zivilcourage & Widerstand in Karlsruhe.