Understanding Brexit. Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century

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Despite all polls in the run-up to the United Kingdom's EU membership referendum on the 23rd of June 2016 indicating a very close outcome, the decision of a narrow majority of voters that Britain should leave the European Union seems, with hindsight, to have taken nearly everybody by surprise. Historians, too, once again proved to be no better prophets than anyone else. The two-day conference „Understanding Brexit. Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century", organised by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (IfZ), München, and the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), was a way of responding to this failure. The event aimed to take up the challenge which „Brexit" poses to our established narratives of twentieth-century history. Which of these narratives do we have to revise? How shall we in the future conceive of Britain's place within European history? And what does Brexit mean for our understanding of European integration since 1945? In order to reflect on these questions the conference brought together 22 historians from the UK and Germany (as well as one from the USA).

To begin with two short observations of a more political nature: First, the mere fact that this conference dealing with Britain's place in Europe took place in Munich contained a political message in itself. Nobody pretended to be neutral on Brexit; all participants were like-minded in their sorrow, if not outspoken anger, regarding the referendum's outcome and the British Government's attempts to implement the vote. Second, if some conversations over those two days reflected a hope that Brexit might still be reversed, this hope was primarily expressed by German scholars living and working in the UK (or who had done so for many years in the past). British colleagues themselves seemed much more fatalistic in this respect.

But back to the question of why we got it so wrong. In their introduction, the conference organisers MICHAEL SCHAICH (GHIL) and MARTINA STEBER (IfZ München) did not hold back from sharp criticism of the historical profession's short-sightedness on both sides of the English Channel. Steber noted the paradox that British history, which once in the German „Sonderweg" debate had appeared as a positive antithesis, is itself now treated in the UK with a certain kind of exceptionalism. In most universities British history and European history are separate faculties. Scholars of the former compare their findings much more frequently with US history or, since the „imperial turn" of the last decades, even with the history of Commonwealth states, than with the history of their European neighbours. In short, in the recent past British historiography has been everything *but* European. At the same time European historians have tended to describe European integration mostly as the success story of an „ever closer union". In this „Whig history", the special case of the UK has at best been observed in the narrative of „the awkward partner". So has this state of affairs caused us to misinterpret the long-term direction of British-European relations? The conference had hardly started when KLAUS H. GOETZ (München), chair of the first panel, provocatively questioned whether we could find much explanation in long-term factors at all. In view of the fundamental but unforeseen political shifts of the last years, should we not better emphasise short-term factors? Does the world nowadays follow any regularity at all? Or have the rules just radically changed, and we do not understand the new ones yet? Not by accident, 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 were to be right, they would not stop to take long-term developments into account when seeking to understand the causes of Brexit in depth.

The most significant long-term factor usually cited by Brexit supporters is the whole topic of sovereignty. In their narrative, it is closely linked to the exclusive exercise of sovereignty by national parliaments and com-

bined with the rejection of the increasing power of „unelected" bureaucrats in Brussels. In developing overriding powers, so the narrative goes, the EU has quasi unilaterally changed the „marriage contract" that was agreed when Britain first entered the Common Market in 1973. In Munich, this narrative was only prominent at a public panel held at the Bavarian Academy for Sciences and Humanities, where, as expected, GISELA STUART (former chair of the Vote Leave Campaign) and, less expected, SIR PAUL LEVER (former ambassador to Germany) took a strong anti-European stance. At the internal conference sessions, however, little was heard in support of this narrative as an explanation for Brexit. On the contrary, PIERS LUDLOW (LSE) underlined in his paper the overall very constructive role Britain has played as a member of the European Communities since 1973. Specifying British contributions to European integration, ranging from the Single Market to invigorating the European Parliament, Ludlow at least complicated the narrative of the „awkward partner". Nonetheless, Ludlow 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" rather than a „good European". JAMES ELLISON (Queen Mary, London) highlighted in a retrospection of the debates on Britain's entry into the Common Market in the 1960s that even back then the political leaders failed to create enthusiasm for Europe. As Labour Eurosceptic Barbara Castle famously accused Harold Wilson in 1967, the Prime Minister tried to „boring 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 experiences with referenda on the European constitution in France and the Netherlands in 2005, in many European states a majority of the people may, when 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 nearly every single poll in Germany showed even stronger Eurosceptic attitudes than in Britain. The crucial difference, Geppert argued, rests in different constitutional settings. In this respect Geppert sharply criticised the use of referenda as a political weapon of last resort by British Prime Ministers, but praised the German institution of the Federal Constitutional Court, whose judges were able to give constructive answers to problems too complex for the simplifying alternative of a „yes or no".

So was there nothing special about British-European relations other than the instruments used to measure Euroscepticism? ANDREAS WIRSCHING (IfZ München) claimed in the discussion that one long-term factor that indisputably singled out the UK from other European countries was its special global role in the past. DANE KENNEDY (Washington) stressed the fact that Britain joined the Common Market roughly about the same time 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 apologise in public for colonial atrocities, strong parts of the electorate clung to the view that the Empire was actually a good thing and wanted to overcome „postcolonial 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. While according to this analysis the political left had lost its formerly strong „constitutional patriotism" in the face of countercultural influences since the 1960s, the political right in the same period had lost its former sense for the fragility of Britain's socio-economic situation. With the success of Thatcher, the Conservatives began to believe their own sales message of a „reawakened nation", but ironically gave little attention to the fact that the UK's comeback after a decade of „decline" set in after it had joined the Common Market. Finally, after the Brexit referendum of 2016 Empire nostalgia rose to a new high with the Tory Government's soundbite of an independent „global Britain". However, on what shaky ground that message stands became clear in ECKART

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[1] Barbara Castle, The Castle Diaries 1964-70, London 1984, S. 242.

CONZE's (Marburg) paper on transatlanticism. As Conze argued, since 1945 at the latest the UK's foreign policy had depended as much on the USA as the foreign policy of any other west European state. The much heralded „special relationship" had been purely symbolic from the outset. In fact, during the Cold War the overarching architecture of the US-led transatlantic security alliance had been built on the premise of Britain's close integration into Western Europe. Pointing in the same direction, MARTIN DAUNTON (Cambridge) mirrored British post-war debates on monetary policy. After decolonisation, 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"). However, ultimately 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 consequently had to fight any impetus for a European currency union. „Global Britain", Daunton concluded, is merely a delusion masking „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 seem to be on retreat for some time now. Euroscepticism, Black therefore concluded, is almost exclusively a political and economic phenomenon, not a cultural one. In consequence many papers focused on the socioeconomics of Brexit. JIM TOMLINSON (Glasgow) took a look at the economic problems of those (mainly English) deindustrialised regions that voted Leave above average in the Brexit referendum. Regarding the causes of unemployment in these regions, he argued not to overestimate the impact of globalization. As he tried to demonstrate with the example of the steel industry, the increase in productivity had on balance caused even more job losses. Although this claim was challenged in the discussion with reference to the dislocation of whole industries due to globalisation, nobody disputed Tomlinson's overall picture of the devastating effects of unemployment in these areas. While the effects had for some time been cushioned by the growth of public sector work and an increase in subsidised low-paid jobs, the cuts to in-work benefits under the austerity policy from 2010 had soon destroyed this „new Speenhamland". Looking essentially at the same regions, MIKE KENNY (Cambridge) confirmed the diagnosis of a resurgence of „little England". As polling proves, the more people identified themselves as „English" (in contrast to „British") the more they were likely to vote Leave. Kenny underlined that the parochial sentiments of „little England" communities were amongst other reasons driven to a considerable degree by hostility towards the capital London, and he made a good point in reminding that „non-London England" is today the last remaining part of the UK without 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 most likely to view immigration as society's major concern.

This, finally, led to the topics of immigration and racism. ELIZABETH BUETTNER (Amsterdam) recounted how fears of immigration had already overshadowed the discussions on Britain's entry into the Common Market in the 1960s and 70s. Back then, even Harold Wilson suggested restrictions on freedom of movement for migrants from Southern Italy. Only because it had already turned out by the mid-seventies that the fierce predictions of mass migration had not materialised, the issue failed to influence the first referendum on the UK's Common Market membership in 1975. In the last decade, however, Islamic terrorism as well as growing labour migration from Eastern Europe after the expansion of the EU led to a new resurgence of xenophobic fears. CHRISTINA VON HO-

DENBERG (Queen Mary, London) gave an overview of the British tabloids' coverage of the referendum campaign that left no doubt about the lack of journalistic ethos in the way in which the pro-Brexit media exploited fears that had spread during the refugee crisis of 2015. Continuous newspaper pictures of camping refugees at the beaches of Calais and headlines like „The Invaders" also stirred up ancient fears of foreign invasions associated with the English Channel, as EMILY ROBINSON (Sussex) indicated. Many participants of the conference were inclined in the end to regard fears related to immigration as the most important single factor that led to the Brexit vote.

But with this finding, sure enough, the question of how exclusively „British" the Brexit vote has been becomes all the more urgent. There was a broad recognition at the conference table that popular xenophobic moods had swung elections and referenda in the past in other European states as well, and could do so again in the very near future. Manifold concerns were expressed throughout the conference that the European Union could fall apart further in the next few years as a result of populist right-wing movements. That, in the end, was the somewhat disquieting bottom line of the conference: even these most informative and inspiring two days in Munich amongst friends and like-minded persons could not dispel the anxiety with which many scholars of contemporary history look at the fragile state of liberal democracy in Europe today.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:
Michael Schaich (London) and Martina Steber (München): Narratives of British Twentieth Century History

Panel 1: Reluctant Partners? The UK and European Integration
Chair: Klaus H. Goetz (München)

James Ellison (Queen Mary, London): Rethinking Britain and Europe, 1945-73

Piers Ludlow (LSE): More Than Just an Awkward Partner? Britain's Experience of Community Membership Since 1973

Panel 2: Democracy and Political Culture in Britain: Monarchy, Parliament and Parties
Chair: Emily Robinson (Sussex)

Dominik Geppert (Bonn): Brexit as a Product of Britain's Political Culture

Ben Jackson (Oxford): Conceptualising Brexit: Sovereignty and Pluralism in British Political Ideologies, 1979-2016

Public Panel Discussion: Brexit. Zu Vergangenheit und Zukunft Großbritanniens in Europa
Chair: Andreas Wirsching, Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin

Discussants: Paul Lever, former British ambassador to Germany – Philip Oltermann, The Guardian – Gisela Stuart, former Labour M.P. – Andreas Gestrich, German Historical Institute London

Panel 3: The Heritage of Empire. Relationships around the Globe
Chair: Magnus Brechtken (München)

Dane Kennedy (Washington): Brexit and Memories of Empire

Eckart Conze (Marburg): Special Relationships. Britain, Germany and the Dynamics of Transatlanticism

Panel 4: Cherishing the Market. The British Economy
Chair: Christiane Eisenberg (Berlin)

Martin Daunton (Cambridge): One World or Two Worlds? Defining Britain's Place in the World Economy

Jim Tomlinson (Glasgow): Can De-Industrialization Explain the Brexit Vote?

Panel 5: Society and Popular Culture
Chair: Frank Mort (Manchester)

Lawrence Black (York): A Eurosceptic Culture?

Christina von Hodenberg (Queen Mary, London): Mass Media and Narratives of Nation-Building

Panel 6: Identity, Immigration and Race
Chair: Andreas Fahrmeir (Frankfurt am Main)

Elizabeth Buettner (Amsterdam): British Mi-

gration Fixations Since the Second World War: Europeans and Non-Europeans Compared

Mike Kenny (Cambridge): English Nationalism after Empire: Britannia Unchained or the Remaking of the English Working Class?

Final Discussion
Chair: Andreas Gestrich (London)

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