

ROUNDTABLE INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Contemporary European Historians on Brexit

On 23 June 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. The unfolding drama of this exit, or ‘Brexit’, has stupefied and captivated audiences in the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond ever since. As this issue of *Contemporary European History* goes to press, the United Kingdom and the European Union have not yet finalised the withdrawal agreement on the details of their divorce, nor have they agreed the shape of their future relations. The possibility of an acrimonious ‘no-deal’ exit cannot be ruled out at this stage, either because of a failure by the two sides to reach an agreement, or because one or both are unable to deliver the terms of it. It is widely assumed that the UK will legally leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, just over a month after the print copies of this journal issue will have hit the library shelves.

Historians of the twentieth century are often conflicted about the idea of writing ‘current’ or newsworthy history. On the one hand, many agree that their fields of research can be made particularly relevant and potent by questions of current concern. If pressed, many will also admit that knowledge of recent and not-so-recent developments can improve our ability to diagnose ongoing problems. But on the other hand, few would want to claim that past examples provide any easy fixes or solutions for current crises, or that, in fact, it is at all feasible to trace direct, straight lines connecting any given past moment with the present. We don’t think it is. And yet, there are moments when historical perspectives can provide insights that public discourse cannot otherwise grasp. Brexit is one such moment. As Anne Deighton puts it in her contribution to this roundtable, ‘at crucial moments, historians can see the past through a new lens – and Brexit is just such a lens’. Considering Brexit in the broad sweep of contemporary European history, we believe, has much to offer for both historians of Europe and practitioners of Brexit.

The roundtable format has proven to be a useful one for exploring matters of historiographical controversy. As a journal, *Contemporary European History* seeks to provide critical reflection on contemporary developments in the field. The essays in this issue examine Brexit as a historically-rooted phenomenon that, regardless of when and how it ultimately happens, will have consequences for the way in which European history is being, and will be, written. The aim of this collection is emphatically not to re-enact the debates of the 2016 referendum or the rights and wrongs of each campaign, nor is it to replicate existing conversations between specialists in European integration. Instead, this roundtable provides an opportunity for a range of historians of Europe working within very different national and historiographical traditions to reflect on the historical significance and contexts that gave rise to Brexit and within which it should be understood. Even in the event that Brexit is delayed or even cancelled, the last two years have brought to light deep cleavages between historical developments and perceptions in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe which historians of the twentieth century will find difficult to forget.

We asked nineteen European historians (by professional specialism rather than nationality, even if they are also Europeans) about their thoughts on Brexit. On some level, the prospect of Brexit is strikingly anti-historical, in that it defies everything we thought we knew about the history of internationalisation and globalisation in general, and European integration in particular, as a more or less one-directional process. The history of the reverse, of any significant and

lasting fragmentation and de-internationalisation, remains to be written. How then can historians write Brexit into longer-term trajectories of European history? How does it compare with other previous moments of crisis in European structures? Will it represent a key turning point in European history, to be viewed alongside the events of the two world wars or post-war settlements, or the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989–90? How do particular historical and national vantage points alter the significance of Brexit? And what will anyone thinking about Brexit miss if it is not considered as part of a wider historical process? In short essays (c. 2,000 words) and with no recourse to footnotes, the contributors gave us a range of answers to these questions.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this collection is the variety of pertinent historical contexts in which Brexit can make an appearance and be analysed. It is not surprising that the UK and British history look very different when studied from Prague, Bratislava, Warsaw, Budapest, Bucharest, Berlin, Madrid or Barcelona, Athens, or London (or, for that matter, from Edinburgh, Belfast or Dublin, though those perspectives are not explicitly covered here). More surprising is the range of chronologies, formative periods and historical turning points that appear in these accounts, some of which do not align entirely with the standard narratives of contemporary European history as divided roughly into war, interwar, war, post-war, Cold War and post-Cold War chapters.

Having said that, both world wars still occupy a central place. Some contributors show how wars resulted in political ruptures or failed solutions that can serve as cautionary tales for Brexit; others argue that one or both of the world wars sowed the seeds of political and cultural divergence between the United Kingdom and Europe that eventually culminated in Brexit. For example, Ferenc Laczó and Mate Rigo conclude that Brexit will result in similar challenges to those stemming from the ‘exits’ of central European nations from the German and Austro-Hungarian empires during and after the First World War. Martin Conway identifies ‘the formative decades of the twentieth century’, more precisely the late 1930s and Second World War, as a period that saw the separation of UK and European alliances and shared projects, after which continental Europeans became more reluctant to allow *their* Europe to be changed by the United Kingdom. Pertti Ahonen reminds us that both wars not only created large numbers of people on the move but also resulted in a widespread perception of foreign migrants as a threat to national communities that had to be managed and limited; both wars produced nationally defined responses to evidently trans- and international challenges, just as the Brexit referendum did in 2016. The Second World War also saw the peak in the organisation of far-right nationalist internationalist movements, which David Motadel sees as precursors to and allies of the pro-Brexit campaign in 2016. The periods of reconsolidation and reconstruction after both world wars generated their own potential precedents. Pieter Lagrou discusses two very different referendums stemming from internal divisions at a time when political institutions were at crisis point: the 1921 Upper Silesia plebiscite and the 1950 referendum in Belgium on the return of King Leopold III; neither precedent suggests that Brexit will provide lasting solutions. Dominik Geppert describes very different experiences of post-war reconstruction in Germany and the United Kingdom after 1945, as a result of which the two countries’ approaches to Europe and European integration differed radically.

The Cold War era is also crucial to many of these narratives. According to Anne Deighton, the key shift in the UK’s understanding of Europe can be dated to the beginning of the Cold War, the years between 1948 and 1951, when the UK government self-consciously set out to rebalance its European and other international commitments, and as a result withdrew from on-going deliberations about future European integration. Thorsten Barring Olesen compares UK considerations in 2018–9 with those in the 1960s, when the UK was first prevented from joining the European Economic Community. Although today’s Brexiteers seem to long for the pre-1973 world, he concludes that Cold War divisions then and a more globalised world today mean that the consequences of Brexit will be very different from those of not being ‘in the club’ fifty years ago. Memories of local contacts between the United Kingdom and its European neighbours also

play a role, such as the armed resistance in Cyprus against the British authorities in the 1950s, which Nikolaos Papadogiannis argues cast an early shadow over Greek–British relations that later complicated Greek responses to Brexit. In Sandrine Kott’s narrative of the paradoxical history of European welfare policy, stuck between national policies and Europe-wide aspirations, the Cold War race between two competing models of ‘good society’ was a major factor in the competitive increases in states’ social welfare expenditures across Europe. The subsequent scaling back of these investments in 1980s Britain is as fundamental in Monika Baár and Paul von Trigt’s story as it is in Kott’s, and in each case internationally oriented and connected British activists stepped into the spaces vacated by the rolled-back British state. In both examples they complicated the ‘British’ position in Europe, since their analyses often differed significantly from the official UK government’s attempts to disengage from Europe-wide and EU policies.

The most significant moment in the Central and Eastern European perspectives is the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989–91 as a formal end of the Cold War, though many contributors in this collection argue that the extent to which it represented a sharp break with the past has been overestimated. For Maria Bucur, the failure by the UK to live up to the hopes that millions of Eastern Europeans had pinned on it after 1989 came on the back of decades’ worth of British absence and disinterest in the region and unleashed a new ‘tribalism’. Michal Kopeček says that although the new post-communist democracies adopted the political language of constitutionalism used in the Western world, they thought about key terms in very different ways; the heritage of the communist era cast a long and continued shadow over political process and understanding across the region. Vladimir Tismaneanu agrees and argues that the fragility of the new structures in post-communist Europe ultimately prefigured and amplified the fragility of democracy at large. Nevertheless, Ferenc Laczó and Mate Rigo maintain that the UK is unlikely to fare as well from its exit from the EU as the Eastern European countries did in 1990 when they ‘exited’ the Soviet Bloc, even if similar arguments about the triumph of national traditions were voiced on both occasions – not least because the EU is likely to survive rather longer after Brexit than the Soviet Union did after the dissolution of its Cold War bloc.

Some essays also identify more recent but equally fundamental points of rupture. For example, Adam Hudek and Michal Kopeček point to the 2004 moment of EU enlargement, when the UK’s former ‘pupils’ in Central Europe received the opportunity to become deciders of its future fate in the EU. More specifically, after the UK opened its job market to the new EU member countries, which Hudek reminds us was a beneficial arrangement both for the suppliers and users of labour, it had also thereby created the conditions which prevented it from the quick withdrawal and disappearance from the region it had practiced in the past. At the same time, some notable continuities are also part of the Brexit story, such as Hudek’s narrative of a more or less unbroken history of 200 years of Anglophilia in Central Europe as a means to counter and limit German influence, which even the disaster of Munich in 1938 could not dampen significantly, and which he suspects Brexit is unlikely to change.

Very different ideas of ‘Europe’ emerge in these essays, ranging from nineteenth-century Italian ideas about a politically and culturally heterogeneous continent that lacked an obvious core and peripheries, discussed by Axel Körner, to descriptions of imposed or self-perceived Southern, Central, East Central or Eastern European fringes around the North Western British centre. Some contributors point to specific dynamics and identities of European regions, while others foreground Europe-wide patterns. According to David Motadel, different episodes of far-right populist nationalism across Europe during the last almost 200 years have to be understood as a connected, shared, internationally-organised project, and the UK’s ‘Leave’ campaign was merely the latest expression. By contrast, Michal Kopeček argues that although they share superficial similarities, today’s Eurosceptic movements in Eastern Europe have very different roots from those in the UK, and they should not be conflated with each other.

It is striking how many essays refer to a historical view of the UK as a yardstick and model to other nations. Maciej Janowski and Adam Hudek both consider the influence of the Czech writer Karel Čapek, who visited the UK in the early 1920s and returned with a firm idea of the country as the land of liberty, modernity and progress. Not just its political institutions but also its educational system was widely admired, and significant numbers of Europeans went to the UK to study.

Europeans' perception of British history as a path to be emulated was matched by a long-standing sense within the UK of its own exceptionalism. This exhibited itself among British elites through an aloof self-assurance and superiority, as Janowski observes, and stood in stark contrast to the anxieties about imminent dangers of invasion across Central and Eastern Europe or concerns about aberrant historical paths in Southern Europe. Taking the UK's self-perceived historical uniqueness further, arguably the most *British* feature of the 2016 referendum is that the result was not simply ignored or undone. We are reminded by Martin Conway and others that unlike much of the continent modern Britain was not invaded or defeated in war, nor had it experienced the collapse of its political institutions. The rest of Europe, by contrast, still has a much greater historical familiarity with the vagaries of political order, and when a referendum produced a questionable result it was simply repeated. The 2016 British referendum was not the first to be won by a Eurosceptic majority. But unlike Denmark's initial rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, or Ireland's initial rejections of the Treaty of Nice in 2001 and the Treaty of Lisbon in 2008, the British result seems to stand, with all its divisive consequences.

Brexit thus has to be understood in the context of a long history of British claims about the uniqueness of the UK's past. However, as Axel Körner argues, these views are in practice distorted and undermined by an equally long history of close connections between the UK, the British Empire and the European continent. Piers Ludlow agrees that the (still popular) narrative of the UK as an 'awkward partner' in Europe does not reflect the many ways in which British governments, officials and political parties were deeply involved in European affairs and connected with European institutions and exercised significant influence. Many authors in this collection also remark on the long history of the UK as a destination for Europeans which provided plenty of occasions for the British to encounter continental Europeans at first hand, and vice versa. As Conway and Körner show, European exiles in the UK often had mixed reactions to British institutions and traditions.

Nonetheless, many contributors agree that with Brexit, the UK's status as a widely admired and aspired role model became irreparably damaged. Pieter Lagrou observes that by choosing a referendum to solve insoluble internal differences, the UK's political establishment abandoned the long tested path of political moderation and stability, with the result that the rest of Europe has lost a model of stable parliamentary politics and representative government. Núñez Seixas notes that for centuries Spanish historians had seen the UK as a model of tolerance, modernity and governance (except perhaps in the management of its internal national differences), but that Brexit made this comparison much less appealing. In the light of Brexit, Spanish historians have been encouraged to liberate Spanish history from the shackles of being judged against idealised perceptions of British development. The prospect of Brexit presents a painful disappointment to countries, movements and regions that had long upheld the British path as a superior one to be followed and emulated, though Núñez Seixas shows this can also be perceived as an opportunity and new freedom of no longer having to live up to British developments.

In sum, there are at least three reasons why historical perspectives on Brexit are relevant and should be read today. First, the prospect of Brexit has revealed deep historically-rooted misperceptions between the United Kingdom and its European neighbours; Brexit in this sense is a process of stripping away dusty historical delusions about national paths and those of neighbouring countries. Second, so many arguments about Brexit today rest on a selective use of history. Not only was the 'Leave' campaign steeped in a nostalgia for the past and the pretence

that a return to a past era is desirable and possible, but, much more generally, continental European and British understandings of history frame attitudes towards Europe in a completely different way. And, finally, the authors in this collection show that the present debates about British history and its place in Europe alter readings of the past, in some cases significantly. History itself is being rewritten in the light of Brexit. The aim shared by the contributors and editors is to restore complexity and wariness about uncritical uses of this history.

Jessica Reinisch on behalf of the editors of *Contemporary European History*
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