Can Britain be European?

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With Britain is now facing the very real possibility of national disintegration and an exit from the European Union. Amidst this political crisis, and in the wake of a manifesto celebrating British exceptionalism, historians have mobilised themselves to (re)write the history of the UK, whether for or against Europe.

For all the post-election hubris amongst Conservative MPs, the fact remains that Britain is in a period of profound political crisis. Not since the Northern Irish 'Troubles' of the 1970s and 80s has the country faced such a fundamental threat to its integrity and its place in the world. This threat has come from two closely-linked processes. The first is a resurgent Scottish nationalism. The referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 was a hard-fought battle and, although the Union was preserved by a narrow margin, this did not prevent the Scottish National Party (SNP) from obliterating its Labour opposition in the recent general election. For the foreseeable future, both major political parties in the UK will have to contend with the ominous spectre of Scottish nationalism.

The second process that has shaken the foundation of British politics is Euroscepticism. The inexorable rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which received 3.8 million votes (12.6%) in the May general election, has confirmed the popular roots of Euroscepticism. With the very real prospect of a referendum on EU membership in 2016, there has never been a more heated debate about the future of Britain's place in Europe. And, as is so often the case where national identities and collective memories are at stake, historians have been called into action. Just as German historians were at the forefront of debates over the origins and uniqueness of the Holocaust in the late 1980s, or as French historians mobilised themselves for or against the French state's *lois mémorielles* ("memory laws") in the mid-2000s, British historians are now engaged in a veritable culture war over Britain's past.

Historians for Britain

One of the most striking manifestations of this culture war is the recent creation of an entity called Historians for Britain. The original impetus for this organisation was a letter to *The Times* in 2013 that called for a renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the European Union. It was signed by 22 well-known British historians, but did not receive a great deal of

attention at the time. Hence, perhaps, the reason why these same historians felt the need both to create a more coherent organisation in 2014 and to seek funding from the anti-EU business organisation, Business for Britain. With an election that reaffirmed the importance of Europe, the members of the organisation obviously felt the time was right for a new intervention on the subject.

The result was an article by the widely-respected historian of the Mediterranean David Abulafia, boldly entitled 'Britain: apart from or a part of Europe?', published online in early May 2015 in the popular history journal *History Today*. The text of the manifesto, placed under an oversized photo of Allied officers planning the bombardment of Nazi Germany in 1944, plainly restated the Eurosceptic ideology that lies at the heart of the Historians for Britain campaign, namely that "renegotiation [of Britain's relationship] has to include a commitment by the EU itself to reform its ways and, at the very least, to leave those countries that do not seek to be part of a 'United States of Europe' free to rely upon their own sovereign institutions without interference". If the piece had been limited to this rather unremarkable argument, it would probably have sunk without trace. But this was not merely another opinion piece on Europe; it was intended as a historical narrative of British exceptionalism. Or, as Abulafia and his colleagues put it, "we aim to show how the United Kingdom has developed in a distinctive way by comparison with its continental neighbours".

To this end, the piece developed three historical arguments to explain why Britain stands apart from the European community. First, the authors suggested that Britain experienced a "degree of continuity […] unparalleled in continental Europe", which comes from "principles of political conduct that have their roots in the 13th century or earlier" and "ancient institutions" such as the British Parliament and British universities. Second, the authors maintained that Britain has been spared "the intense nationalism that has consumed many European countries", that the "British political temper has been milder than in the larger European countries" and that Britain was virtually untouched by the great ideologies of the twentieth century ("Fascism… anti-Semitism… Communism"). Finally, the authors gave their argument for British exceptionalism a global twist by suggesting that, because "Britain… ruled over vast tracts of the globe very far from Europe" for much of its recent history, its future equally lies beyond the shores of Europe. Taken together, these three characteristics were said to "reflect the distinctive character of the United Kingdom, rooted in its largely uninterrupted history since the Middle Ages".

Unlike in 2013, the reaction this time was instantaneous. An open letter to *History Today* – signed by over 250 historians – denounced the historical inaccuracies and elisions in Abulafia's piece. Another group of historians announced the creation of an online counter-group called Historians for History. Even the national press picked up on the controversy in a series of articles and editorials. But, while many of these attacks on the Historians for Britain manifesto have (rightly) focused their attention on correcting the numerous errors and simplifications in the text, there is a strong case to be made for unpacking, not simply the details of the manifesto, but also its underlying assumptions – none of which can be understood in isolation from the British experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, we would like to draw attention to two assumptions that reveal a good deal

about the way British history is taught and disseminated: first, a myth of continuity and stability; and, second, the celebration of British exceptionality.

A myth of British continuity

One of the most powerful assumptions in the manifesto is a myth of continuity – the argument that Britain has an "uninterrupted history". For the modern period, this view appears to have a grain of truth. Since the late eighteenth-century, the absence of a major political revolution and any experience of occupation places Britain in a category of its own. Even where Britain has intervened militarily, it has done so in foreign lands. Battles at Mafeking, Ypres or Gallipoli did not directly affect those who remained at home. And the British never had to endure the humiliation and soul-searching of those societies confronted with the revolutionary anger of the Jacobins, the reinvention of elites by Napoleon, the purges of the Bolshevik regime, or the racially-driven zeal of the Nazis. To this extent, the Historians for Britain are correct that Britain has followed an unusually stable path to the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, even the most cursory examination of British history reveals that, for the vast majority of the population of the British Isles and the British Empire, there has been little meaningful continuity. Whether it was the dislocation of indigenous societies in Australia or India, or the experiences of Britain's working-classes, the modern period has been one of rupture and deep transformation. The Industrial Revolution, for instance, transformed British society beyond all recognition, introducing new systems of management, governance and socio-spatial organisation that had far-reaching effects. For those working-class communities whose towns and cities experienced industrialisation in the nineteenth century and, in many cases, de-industrialisation in the twentieth century, a story of continuity rings hollow. The writings of Charles Dickens and Friedrich Engels – to name but a few – are a testimony to the profound social conflicts and inequalities that accompanied the growth of capitalism in Britain.

But if such violent discontinuities were self-evident to contemporary observers and generations of subsequent historians, how is it that the Historians for Britain can so easily celebrate Britain's supposedly 'uninterrupted' history? The answer lies in the remarkable stability of the British elite in the modern age. Through institutions like Eton and Oxford, and a peculiarly cohesive system of elite patronage in the City and across the British empire, the British ruling classes successfully maintained their cohesion where others did not. Germany's elites were transformed by the rise of Nazism and the creation of the GDR; France's elites suffered repeated exile, persecution and purges from the French Revolution through Vichy and Algeria; and both Nazism and Communism wreaked havoc with the intellectual, political and cultural elites of Eastern European societies. The British elites never experienced the equivalent of the Katyn Massacre in 1940; they have rarely feared for their lives.

The remarkable ability of the British elite to maintain itself and its institutions has both enhanced a narrative of continuity and rendered critique inaudible. The perpetuation of

"tradition", whether in the dining halls of Oxbridge colleges or the House of Lords, is widely celebrated in the UK but does not receive nearly the same critical attention as elsewhere. There is no equivalent, for example, of Pierre Bourdieu's withering attack on France's higher educational institutions in his sociological writings, or the shelves of popular books on how Ivy League universities have strangled the American elite. Paradoxically, the enthusiasm with which British Eurosceptics denounce "Brussels bureaucrats" has protected the British elite. For all their far-right credentials, UKIP are a long way behind, say, the French Front National, which perpetually denounces the *énarchie* and the incestuous world of the *grandes écoles*.

This means that what lies at the heart of the Historians for Britain manifesto – and British Euroscepticism more generally – is not actually a grand story of national continuity and stability, but a much narrower one of elite reproduction. Over time, this has fuelled a myth of continuity in British political culture that has been reinforced by the sheer longevity of certain institutions. But longevity does not mean stability. It is quite obvious that the British Parliament, the position of the monarch, the power of the media, the way universities work, the role of banks, or the training of lawyers and judges today is hardly the same as it was in the age of Pitt the Younger. For sure, a remarkable number of the British elite – from David Cameron downwards – have attended educational institutions that have existed for centuries, but this kind of continuity is hardly representative of British history as a whole. Whatever the Historians for Britain might say, Britain is not – and never has been – as stable as it appears.

Splendid isolation or European engagement?

The ease with which the British elites have subscribed to a narrative of continuity has reinforced the second major assumption that underpins the Historians for Britain manifesto, namely a story of British exceptionality. One might justifiably argue that all nations present themselves as exceptional. Germans have imagined their *Sonderweg*, the French have been told that their origins lie in an all-conquering Republic, Poles have seen themselves as the "Christ of Nations", and Irish self-perceptions claim the country can be compared to no other. But the Historians for Britain go one step further. They argue that British exceptionality means that Britain is much less European than we think. Or, to use the exact words of their manifesto, that "the United Kingdom has always been a partner of Europe without being a full participant in it".

Such a claim has been largely disproved by several generations of historical scholarship but the fact that it can be so easily reproduced by a group of high-level historians shows the extent to which it remains embedded in a British way of understanding history. At a very general level, the banal use of the term "the Continent" to describe everything on the other side of the English Channel reflects this inability to place Britain in its European context. Within higher education more specifically, "British history" is still almost always taught as a discrete subject, in contrast to "European", "world", or even (at Oxford) "general" history. In the cases where "imperial" history is added to a standard course on British history, it is always the history of the British Empire. And there remains a heated debate about how –

if at all – histories of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland should be integrated into British history.

This parochialism has been exacerbated in recent years by the global pre-eminence of English-language scholarship and the steep decline in language skills amongst British school students. It is difficult today to find a group of students large enough to teach a course that involves French, and virtually impossible to find any British students at top universities who can at least read some German, Spanish, Italian or Portuguese. At postgraduate level as well, language training has been scrapped. While most US and European universities still expect PhD students to train in at least one foreign language, this is a rarity in the UK. As time goes on, these failures in language education – especially marked in comparison to other northern European countries – have encouraged a tendency towards British exceptionalism.

There was nothing inevitable about this process. For some time now, British universities have employed exceptionally large numbers of European and non-European academics. There is also a vibrant tradition of British historians writing about Europe.[1] Indeed, the list of "supporters" of the Historians for Britain group includes many historians who have written outstanding work on European history. But the group's manifesto shows how little this scholarship has translated into an understanding of Britain's place within Europe. Just a few examples, amongst many others, shed light on the extent to which British history is inseparable from European history in the modern period.

Certainly the most surprising – and shocking – omission from the Historians for Britain manifesto is the history of British imperialism. The claim that Britain's global reach since the 18th century makes Britain less European is positively bizarre. Did French rule over Martinique and New Caledonia, Belgian rule over the Congo, Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, or Portuguese rule over Angola make these countries less European? On the contrary, empire increasingly bound European nation-states together in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to such an extent that decolonisation became a defining feature of European history. An empire built on racist foundations, centuries of ruthless exploitation of human and natural resources, the forced resettlement of entire peoples, and decades of colonial wars against "insurgents" and independence movements characterise British history no less than European history.

In fact, one could argue that violence has been an integral part of modern British history. Historians of Ireland, India and Kenya have repeatedly argued for the devastating effects of British imperialism, and there is now a blossoming literature on comparative colonial violence and genocide.[2] Unfortunately, as the ongoing success of Niall Ferguson's

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[1] One thinks, for instance, of Richard Cobb and Theodore Zeldin on France, Ian Kershaw on Germany or Hugh Seton-Watson on Russia. Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders: British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[2] Thoralf Klein & Frank Schumacher (eds.), *Kolonialkriege: Militärische Gewalt im Zeichen des Imperialismus* (Hamburg:Hamburger Edition, 2006); Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Far Away Places: The Genesis of the Modern World 1945-65* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013); D. M. Leeson, *Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag. The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya,* (London: Pimlico 2005)*; Daniel Branch,*

neo-imperialist historical writing indicates, this has had little impact on British public life.[3] In France, the violent legacies of empire and decolonisation have been in the news since the 1990s, with angry debates over torture during the Algerian War and France's 'guilt' over slavery. But the British partitions of Ireland, Palestine and India, and the decolonisation of Malaya, have not received the same degree of public scrutiny, except in the form of imperial nostalgia.[4] This is all the more surprising when one considers that, between 1945 and 1992, Britain was involved in more wars than any other nation (18 of them, ahead of India (16) and the United States (12)).[5] This hardly speaks of a congenitally "mild" political disposition.

The Historians for Britain are right that the UK did not succumb to Fascism, even if its elites openly flirted with it in the 1930s.[6] They are also right that British Communism was a negligible political force, even if some of the most gifted postwar British historians (including Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson) emerged from the Communist Party Historians Group in the 1950s. But none of this is enough to make Britain exceptionally "mild". The rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution wreaked havoc with community, social and family structures in the nineteenth century and became a symbol of the violence of economic change. It was also an integral part of a Europe-wide process. Britain's merchant and trading classes were extremely good at profiting from the country's maritime links – and perhaps it is still this desire to retain the "benefits" of Europe without incurring the costs that drives contemporary British Euroscepticism. But even this trait is hardly unusual: the Swiss, too, learnt to profit from the misfortune of their neighbours in the twentieth-century. In terms of economic development, Britain's story is domestic, European and global all at once.

The insights of modern cultural history, too, suggest that there is nothing exceptional about Britain. Intellectual movements like the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Modernism swept across Europe, taking on specific forms in different corners of the continent. And the boom in postwar tourism has taken millions of British people to Spain, Italy, Greece and France. It is enough to know that every European teenager in the 1960s was listening to the Beatles and that all British supermarkets today carry olive oil to see clearly how the histories of Britain and the rest of Europe are interwoven. This should be self-evident even to the most ardent Eurosceptic: after all, Britain's most potent symbol of "uninterrupted history" – the royal family – had to change its name from 'Saxe-Coburg-Gotha' to 'Windsor' in 1917 in order to conceal its European origins!

None of this is supposed to imply that Britain does not have its own particular history; like all communities, the British have told themselves certain stories about their place in the

Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya. Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Donald Bloxham & A. Dirk Moses, *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[3] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2004).
[4] For instance, in the TV mini-series *Indian Summers* broadcast on Channel 4 in 2015.
[5] Klaus Jürgen Gantzel & Torsten Schwinghammer, *Die Kriege nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg 1945 bis 1992. Daten und Tendenzen* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1995), p. 108.
[6] Karina Urbach, *Go-Betweens for Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London: Pimlico, 2006); Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (London: Penguin, 2005).

world. But the Eurosceptic and nationalist vision of the Historians for Britain is one that is at odds with innovative historical scholarship that has embraced the global and transnational turn[7], and generations of British and non-British historical scholarship that instinctively places Britain within its European context.[8] In advance of a referendum that will determine the future of the UK, the very least the British people can expect is a historical debate that draws on contemporary scholarship to make a nuanced case for (or against) Britain's European destiny. Unfortunately, the Historians for Britain manifesto is an object lesson in historical irresponsibility, both in its attempt to twist history for political goals and in its inability to see beyond national myths.

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[7] On the global and transnational turns, see for instance Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2014); Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons, 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad & Oliver Janz (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2006); Jürgen Kocka, *Geschichte des Kapitalismus* (Munich: Beck, 2013; Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe 1815-1914* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993); Christophe Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); Leonardo Benevolo, *Storia della città* (Rome: Laterza, 2006); and Kaspar Maase, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen: Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur 1850-1970* (Berlin: Fischer, 1997)

[8] Amongst many other examples, see Eric Hobsbawm's 'Ages' tetralogy (*Age of Revolution, Age of Capital, Age of Empire* and *Age of Extremes*); Robert Paxton, *Europe in the 20th Century* (London: Wadsworth Publishing, 2001); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1999); Robert Wink, *Europe 1648-1815: From the Old Regime to the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2005); Luise Schorn-Schütte, *Geschichte Europas in der Frühen Neuzeit: Studienhandbuch 1500-1789* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2013); Serge Berstein & Pierre Milza, *Histoire de l'Europe. Du XIXe au début du XXIe siècle* (Paris: Hatier, 2014); Michael Salewski, *Geschichte Europas. Staaten und Nationen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2004); and Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).