

Agrégation

ANGLAIS

Le Royaume-Uni et la construction européenne

*The United Kingdom
and European Integration*

1^{er} janvier 1973-1^{er} janvier 2021

Richard Davis



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Abbreviations

BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CET	Common External Tariff
CFP	Common Fisheries Policy
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
COREPER	Committee of Permanent Representatives
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party (Northern Ireland)
EC	European Community
ECB	European Central Bank
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights and European Convention on Human Rights
ECJ	European Court of Justice
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EDC	European Defence Community
EEA	European Economic Area
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ERG	European Research Group
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
EU	European Union
EURATOM	European Atomic Energy Community
FTA	Free Trade Area
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NFU	National Farmers Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OEEC	Organisation for European Economic Cooperation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
SEA	Single European Act
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
WEU	Western European Union
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Preface

Writing history can never be devoid of personal opinion or remain entirely neutral. Few histories, least of all the history of Britain's relations with the European Community/Union from 1973 to 2021, have produced a consensus among those looking back on them. The various accounts of Britain's membership of the European organisations established after 1945, and of the causes and consequences of the decision to leave the EU in 2021, tell the story in quite different, sometimes contradictory and conflicting, ways. Such disputes are inherent in historical discussions. Nor is this simply a question of the past. The issues discussed below are still among the most controversial and important facing both the UK and the rest of Europe. The UK's relationship with the EU, whatever position it chooses or attempts to adopt—at its heart, on the edge, or outside—has affected the country in numerous ways. The history of Brexit still has some way to go before it is finally played out, if it ever is. In the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, tried to reassure the country that 'Brexit means Brexit'. At the same time, she called for a 'red, white and blue Brexit.' Nobody, probably not even Theresa May herself, knew what any of this really meant. A decade later, the question remains unanswered.

All relationships take on a different appearance and meaning depending on where they are seen from. There are always alternative points of view, perspectives, and perceptions, all the more so in such controversial questions as those being dealt with here. The relationship between Britain and the EEC/EU looks quite different when seen from one side or the other, from one end of the EU to the other, or from one part of the UK to another. Age, social class, political opinion, and a host of other criteria also play a part. The relationship between Britain, its Continental neighbours, and the international institutions that have brought them together at various times since 1945 is multi-dimensional, something which is mirrored in the vastly differing interpretations that have been proposed.

The views expressed in the following pages are inevitably the reflection of the author's own views on the subject and are conditioned by his personal experience of living in Britain and in the EU before and after Brexit. Indeed, before and after Britain's entry into the EEC in 1973.

Introduction: Britain and Europe, a never ending story

One of the most common phrases in political debate in recent decades has been “Britain and Europe”: a formulation that suggests that these two entities are at once somehow monolithic and also distinct from each other. Yet, before the Second World War, the phrase “Britain and Europe” was much less prevalent, and there are good historical reasons why. In messy historical reality, as distinct from much present-day polemic, “Britain” and “Europe” have rarely followed entirely distinctive paths, any more than they have ever—either of them—been monolithic structures.

Linda Colley, ‘An island, but not in isolation’,
New Statesman, 10 June 2016, p. 3.

The UK’s relations with the rest of Europe and its participation in the process of European integration have been among the most intensely debated questions for more than half a century. They have been at the heart of political upheavals, crises and dramas. Numerous political careers have been terminated as a direct consequence. The question of how to manage the UK’s relations with its European neighbours, and with the various European institutions that emerged after 1945, has caused deep rifts across the country. Pro- and anti-European political parties have clashed. Perhaps more significantly, each of the two major parties, Labour and the Conservatives, has been torn apart over the question. In recent years, their seemingly dominant position in a two-party system has appeared less and less assured. The rise of populist parties with a clear Eurosceptic message has transformed the UK’s political landscape. The House of Commons debates on these questions have been some of the most heated in recent history. When the debate was extended to the entire electorate, the ensuing divisions split the country along numerous fault lines. A decade after the referendum, these fractures show few signs of being healed.

The strength of opinions on all sides of the debate reflects the enormous importance of the issue. The UK’s relations with the rest of Europe are multidimensional and complex, affecting all aspects of national life. The question has been at the heart of British politics for many years, involving political parties, the government in Westminster and the devolved authorities in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. It has been a dominant issue in the media,

in all its forms (newspapers, television, social media, etc.). It also has important economic, commercial, and social dimensions. The relationship with Europe is also unavoidable, however much some people in the UK may be tempted by the idea of 'leaving Europe' and breaking away from the Continent. The links tying the UK to the Continent are numerous. In terms of trade and investment, migration and defence, the UK inevitably needs to look to Europe. Culturally, the connections are strong and deep-seated. Britain's national identity is influenced in many ways by its relations with Europe. The very existence of the UK has even been questioned as a result of the stark differences in voting patterns across its four nations in the 2016 referendum. The social cohesion of the country has likewise been undermined by profound regional and generational differences over the European question. Since the UK first 'entered Europe' in 1973, it has in some ways become more European in outlook, with many people in Britain adopting a more 'European' lifestyle. Continental café culture and Continental holidays have been adopted by an increasing number of Britons. At the same time, large numbers of Europeans have settled in the UK and are now fully integrated into British society. Continental footballers and coaches make up a large contingent in the English and Scottish leagues. On the other hand, there are those who continue to see Europe and the Europeans as alien, as an 'other' against which they can identify themselves. Opposition to Europe, acceptance of Europe, and even welcoming Europe exist alongside one another. This situation has often been the source of considerable friction and clashes.

Britain's involvement in European affairs is inescapable, but its participation in the process of European integration has always been less certain. The record clearly shows that the UK has been unenthusiastic about the idea of an integrated Europe, although it has not been alone in this. The UK consistently maintained a certain distance from the project of European integration. It remained outside the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 and did not participate in the European Economic Community (EEC) when it was founded in 1957. When the UK finally entered in 1973, its participation in the Community remained incomplete. On numerous occasions, it chose to remain outside key integrationist developments. The various opt outs negotiated by successive British governments, notably those that kept the UK out of the euro zone and the Schengen area, meant that the country was in a half in-half out position. This arrangement was precisely what many in the UK sought: the advantages of

participation in an integrated Europe where it met British interests in trade (the British preference for a common market), and non-participation in those areas of European integration where the British felt less comfortable.

This ambiguous attitude brought both advantages and drawbacks. In the discussions between the UK government and the EU following the 2016 referendum, Boris Johnson was accused by some in Europe of ‘cherry picking’ those parts of the EU-UK relationship he wanted while ruling out the rest, of wanting to have his cake and eat it. This had, in many ways, always been the British approach towards European integration. It is not, however, an easy thing to do, particularly in the context of an integrated Europe. The UK always welcomed the free access to the markets of the other EEC/EU member states that came with its membership of those organisations. At the same time, it was less keen on the legal and political framework that went alongside the commercial dimension. The free movement of goods suited the UK very well; the free movement of people was a far more contentious issue, especially for right-wing Eurosceptics inside the Conservative Party and elsewhere. Participation in an economic and monetary union was always a step too far, even for those UK leaders who liked to proclaim their pro-European credentials. Harmonisation of fiscal policy was another red line for UK governments.

The UK’s stance towards and position in the EEC/EU was, therefore, always ambiguous. The 2016 referendum seemed, at first sight, to have settled this issue, and on 1 January 2021 the UK formally left the EU. Despite this apparently clear-cut break, the UK has remained intimately connected to the EU in many ways. The drawn-out negotiations, which were subject to numerous delays and uncertainty, between the June 2016 referendum and the eventual treaty of withdrawal, showed how deeply entrenched those UK-EU connections were and how difficult it was to sever them. A decade after the referendum and five years after the formal withdrawal, many unresolved questions remain. The never-ending story of Britain’s relations with the rest of Europe goes on.

Over the years, there have been a great many books, articles, and documentaries that have attempted to understand and explain the UK’s relations with Europe and European integration. The different accounts reflect the political clashes between rival groups and have inevitably included widely differing interpretations of Britain’s position in Europe. The debate over the 2016 referendum and the UK’s withdrawal from the EU has been at the centre of a particularly lively debate. The causes and consequences of Brexit, the reasons why the electorate

voted the way it did in 2016, and the benefits and losses that have resulted have all been repeatedly analysed in great depth. There are no signs of anything like a consensus emerging. Indeed, there can be no definitive answer as to what would have happened had the UK chosen to remain a member of the EU. Nor is it possible to determine precisely what the balance sheet of leaving has been, either in terms of economic growth, trade figures, or the state of the country's finances. Other events such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have blurred the picture, making any analysis a hazardous exercise. Similar difficulties exist when we look back on the record of the UK's almost half century-long membership of the EEC/EU. The titles of most books on this subject give a generally negative impression. Britain was an 'awkward partner' and a reluctant participant in the European project. It often gave the impression of being dragged along a European path that it did not want to take, in a direction being set by its Continental rivals. Many accounts from the key British players emphasise how they saw Europe and European integration as a dilemma or as a problem; hardly, if ever, as an opportunity. If it was an opportunity, it was usually overlooked. Britain, it has often been argued, 'missed the bus' at the outset of European construction in the 1950s and 1960s, allowing the leadership of this emerging Europe to slip through its hands.

The poor communications between the UK and its European neighbours and the lack of mutual understanding often accentuated their different outlooks on Europe. Their relationship has been troubled, possibly even dysfunctional. The gap between the UK on one side, often alone, and the Continental Europeans on the other has never been easily bridged. Decisively, British negotiators in Brussels frequently faced a solid Franco-German-led bloc whose combined strength far outstripped their own or that of the limited allies they could occasionally line up behind them. For Brexiteers, the UK and the majority of Continental European countries were divided by fundamental differences in attitudes, interests, ambitions for Europe, and by their opposing world views and economic philosophies. How, they argued, could this relationship have ended in any other way than in separation and divorce? From the point of view of the 'leave' campaign in 2016, membership of the EEC/EU had not been a success, and the UK had not benefited from it. Such negative portrayals of Britain's relations with the EEC/EU have gained a good deal of traction. However, it would be wrong to regard this as the whole story. Britain's record in Europe was no doubt marked by numerous reverses and problems. It was certainly never an easy one or entirely harmonious. But it also

included significant successes and benefits. In many ways, the UK's influence in the EEC/EU was considerable, and this needs to be seen alongside the other, more widely publicised, story of setbacks and separation.

The story of Britain and European integration is, therefore, a mixture of attraction and opposition. The balance between the two sides has varied over time. Some elements of an integrated Europe have been attractive to the UK, while others have been resisted or ruled out. The trade-offs between the advantages and the drawbacks were always difficult, particularly when they were being debated in an overheated atmosphere in Parliament and across the country. The media, in particular the popular press, delighted in pouring oil on the fire, as did numerous elements of an increasingly populist political class. All these factors led to Europe becoming the most hotly debated question facing the country.

Part I

Britain, Europe and the World

European integration since the end of the Second World War has been one of the most significant developments for all those countries that have been, at one time or another, participants in its various forms. Most notable amongst them are the European Economic Community (EEC) and its successor, the European Union (EU), although there have been many others, some of which continue to operate today. These organisations have transformed both Europe as a whole and the various nation-states that belong to them. Over time, they became increasingly important international actors, growing both geographically and in their functions, responsibilities, and powers. Their supranational elements have, in some areas, placed them above the nation-states, although overall these have continued to operate as the most important international actors. This fundamental change in Europe, in what Europe means, what it does and how it operates, has been enthusiastically supported in some quarters and violently opposed in others. The European debate has divided all countries, not just the UK. Whatever their differences, both sides, Europhiles and Eurosceptics, have recognised that Europe, since the 1950s, has become increasingly integrated, most visibly in its economic and commercial life. The creation of the single European currency represented another major development. Political integration, however, has always been a more contentious issue and one which many Europeans have been reluctant to envisage. Nevertheless, here too, European integration has progressed with more decisions taken at the European level. The European Commission has become a

major actor in its own right. The powers of the European Parliament have been extended but remain limited and far fewer than those of national legislatures. In some ways, Europe has also become more socially and culturally integrated.

These European developments have been only one part of the transformation of the world since the end of the Second World War. The end of the European empires, the beginning and end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the emergence of an increasingly global economy and culture, and the digital revolution have all happened alongside developments in Europe. European integration can only be fully understood by taking these global changes into consideration. Europe has been an integral part of these global developments, which, in turn, have played an essential role in how Europe itself has changed. These transformations in Europe and beyond have had a profound impact on the UK in all areas of its national life. They have been particularly influential in changing the nature of Britain's relationships with the rest of the world, with the Commonwealth, the United States, and the rest of Europe.

Chapter 1. The weight of history

Brexit might be seen in the historical perspective as the latest attempt to resist a continental tyrant, or as the chance to resume a global role that had been rudely interrupted by joining the EU. But neat historical analogies are not adequate.

David Reynolds, *Island Stories. Britain and its History in the Age of Brexit*, William Collins, 2019, p. 4.

Blair is both deliberately using Britain's historical past as a tool for contemporary politics; while at the same time he is deeply shaped and formed by Britain's traditional political culture of foreign policy ideas. The Labour government takes history and the lessons of history very seriously although 'history' is not always accurately represented by the present government.

Anne Deighton, 'The Foreign Policy of British PM Tony Blair: Radical or Retrograde?' *Humboldt University Working Papers Series*, 2005, p. 12.

The European integration movement that began after 1945 needs to be placed in its historical context, as do the UK's reactions to it. The idea of European integration was rooted in the conviction that Europe needed to break free from its past and adopt a very different way of conducting its international relations. It was, above all, a reaction against the disastrous history that had come before, notably the two world wars. The history of Europe, not just that of the twentieth century but going back centuries, played a significant role in shaping European attitudes. In particular, Franco-German reconciliation drew heavily on memories of their tumultuous past relations and the horrors of 1914-18 and 1939-45. For the British too, memories of the past played an important part in their attitudes towards Europe and towards European integration, but in quite different ways. One Eurobarometer poll in 2016, for example, recorded that when asked if the EU meant 'peace', only 16% said 'yes' in Britain compared to 44% in Germany.

Memories have always played a significant part in determining each country's outlook on Europe. President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl, when they met at Verdun in 1984, were no doubt looking to their own personal memories of the Second World War and drawing conclusions from them for the future relations between their two countries. Earlier meetings in the 1960s between their predecessors, Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, similarly drew on their wartime experiences, with a determination to avoid a return to the horrors of the past. No similar images of European reconciliation come so easily to mind in Britain. Kohl and Mitterrand were deliberately using the past of 1914-18 to look

forward, to promote a more positive future for the Franco-German relationship and, significantly, to place this at the forefront of European integration. There were no equivalent commemorations bringing Britain, France, and Germany together. Instead, Britain's 'memorialization of the Somme and Amiens was a solitary vigil pointing to national isolation and nostalgia.'¹

The personal memories of war did little to incline most British leaders towards a pro-European stance. The wartime childhood memories of Margaret Thatcher may well have influenced her difficult relations with various German leaders. There are numerous other examples of how past grievances and animosities had an impact on decision-making. Collective national memories have often had a significant impact on how people in the UK have reacted to events in Europe and to the development of an integrated Europe, although it is unhelpful to talk in overly generalised ways about what a whole nation thinks. Opinions, especially on such controversial issues as the UK's relations with the rest of Europe, vary enormously without any firm national consensus ever emerging. Moreover, history is constantly open to various, often contradictory, interpretations. It can be used and abused. Whatever version of history is chosen, the European debate in the UK has always been conducted with numerous references to the country's past relations with the rest of Europe. This was particularly the case during the Brexit debate leading up to the June 2016 referendum.

Collective memories and national narratives

The debate around Britain's relations with the rest of Europe and the part it has played in European integration is as much about Britain itself, its identity, how it sees itself, and how it portrays itself to others as it is about the cross-channel relationship. Europe has served as a mirror in which Britain sees itself, or as a foil against which it compares itself. It has been used as a useful 'other' against which the British have created and developed many aspects of their own identity and image. However, if Europe has served as a mirror, it has not always given an accurate or clear reflection. Instead, it has frequently warped and distorted how the two sides see each other and how they see themselves. In a similar way, history, and how it has been interpreted in multiple different ways, has reinforced some unhelpful stereotypes and caricatures of Britain, of Europe, and of the relationship between them.

1. Stuart Sweeney, *The Europe Illusion. Britain, France, Germany and the Long History of European Integration*, 2019, p. 336.

At the same time as Britain was starting to seriously reconsider its relationship with the rest of Europe and becoming increasingly unsure of its place alongside the other Europeans in the EU, it was also facing a serious identity crisis at home. The Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had been coming under strain for some time. Devolution was far from offering a long-term answer to the growing doubts about the UK's future as a unitary state, about what held the four nations together, what could keep them together in the future and about what it actually meant to be British. This became a key issue in British politics and in the country at large at the same time as the country's European identity was also being questioned. Efforts were made to define 'Britishness', without ever coming close to finding a convincing answer. The UK, it seemed, knew neither what it meant to be British, what Britain stood for, nor whether it was, or wanted to be, part of the European group of nations. There has never existed a single national narrative of Britain's past, present, and future; rather, several competing versions. The UK has been increasingly unable to decide which one should be given priority in the same way as it has been unable to achieve a consensus in response to the questions about its relationship to Europe. The two debates have become inextricably linked: how the British see their own nation, if there is still a single British nation, is an integral part of how they see Europe. Various national narratives have been drawn on and collective memories recalled in an attempt to shed light on the European question. More often than not, these efforts have been more of a hindrance to that debate than a help.

One favourite national narrative depicts Britain, often reduced to England, as an essentially seafaring nation, as an 'island race'. This idea of Britain/England was given renewed exposure when David Cameron chose Henrietta Marshall's century-old children's textbook, *Our Island Story. A History of Britain for Boys and Girls from the Romans to Queen Victoria*, as one of his favourite books on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. Around the same time, Michael Gove, the Education Minister, called on schools to encourage the teaching of just this sort of history. Winston Churchill's portrayal of 1940 as Britain's 'Finest Hour', the 'spirit of Dunkirk' and David Low's famous June 1940 cartoon of a lone British soldier standing on top of the cliffs of Dover, with his fist raised in a sign of resistance to the threatening German aircraft above, and the slogan 'Very well, alone', all fitted perfectly into this narrative. The English Channel and the White Cliffs of Dover became favourite backdrops to numerous pro-Brexit campaigns in the 2016 referendum. All of these deeply-rooted images, part of one of the most popular and strongest felt of British national narratives, were successfully called

on by Brexiteers and used to good effect in their campaign. It would be wrong, however, to see 1940 simply as a sign of Britain's isolation from the Continent. The decision to continue fighting was not only to defend Britain; it was also to liberate Europe.

Britain's imperial legacies

When the founding fathers of European integration such as Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet began to set out their plans for the future of the Continent in the 1950s, the UK was still firmly attached to an idea that emphasised its place at the head of the Empire-Commonwealth with a truly global role to play. At a decision-making level, the UK was still in the hands of a generation that had grown up before 1914, in the age of empire, and which had experienced at first hand the two world wars. A typical view in the 1950s came from Anthony Eden, Prime Minister from 1955 to 1957. Joining a European federation, he said, was 'something which we know, in our bones, we cannot do... Britain's story and her interests lie beyond the continent of Europe. Our thoughts move across the seas.'¹ Ceding British national sovereignty to a European high authority such as existed in the ECSC was, for him, anathema. Britain's nostalgia for its imperial past has been compared to the greater willingness of the countries on the Continent to turn that particular page, and to look to a different, European future. One observer, writing in 1963, argued that Continental Europeans had had to

learn by violence certain lessons which, however unpleasant at the time, were to prove salutary in the long run... They learnt not only that loss of Empire is an irreversible and agonising process, but that it necessitates a total national reorientation. Nostalgia for Empire, powerful in Britain, has almost vanished from the continent of Europe. In the end, the loss of Empire has hurt us more.²

These beliefs in Britain's global role, beyond Europe, were given up only very gradually, both by officials in London and by the wider British public. By the 1970s, the Empire had disappeared and the Commonwealth was showing itself to be an inadequate outlet for British trade or as a means of holding onto global influence and importance. Nevertheless, the UK economy was still very much a global one. The City, the banking and insurance sectors, all remained important global players. As the country's trading relations evolved in the 1960s and 70s,

1. Quoted in Alistair Horne, *Macmillan, 1957-1986*, 1989, p. 349.

2. John Mander, *Great Britain or Little England?* 1963. Quoted in Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, 2001, p. 10.

the UK was making a tentative turn towards Europe, but it could never afford to forget its extra-European connections. The balance was only slowly shifting towards Europe. Attitudes in Whitehall and Westminster, and throughout the country, tended to lag behind the changing realities of Britain's international position. Imperial nostalgia remained strong well into the 21st century, as was shown by the rhetoric of later Prime Ministers such as Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

Beyond the pragmatic considerations based on trade figures, state finances, exchange rates, economic performance, and international relations, the sentimental dimension underlying all of these questions was also of great importance. Economics may have been encouraging a turn towards Europe, and the defence of Britain itself was a clear priority over commitments outside of Europe, but could the country's leaders and the public take Europe to their hearts? Would sentiment override the rest? The attachment to the country's ex-Dominions was deeply felt. In the 1960s, when Harold Macmillan attempted to convince the 'Six' to agree to British membership of the EEC, the opposition leader, Harold Wilson, accused him of wanting 'to sell our friends and kinsmen down the river for a problematical and marginal advantage in selling washing machines in Düsseldorf'.¹ From a purely commercial point of view, this was a miscalculation, as became clear in the following years. After 1945, the UK looked primarily to trade with its Dominions and with the global south. The emerging patterns of international trade showed, however, that it was trade within the global north that would be the main driving force of growth. In particular, trade between the six members of the EEC was rapidly increasing, something which British businesses and decision-makers were enviously observing. Redirecting Britain's commercial and political priorities was never going to be an easy exercise, or one that would be willingly undertaken. Britain's past as a truly global actor continued to weigh heavily on British thinking, as did the nostalgic memories of its once great international status.

Britain and Europe: a history of opposition and resistance?

Continental Europe, in numerous British portrayals going back many years, was frequently characterised as the home to various forms of tyranny and as a threat to the country's independence and liberties. In the 'Whiggish' accounts of British and European history that were dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth

1. Quoted in Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot. Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair*, 1998, p. 157.

centuries, this sense of opposition and ideological divide was deeply entrenched. For some in Britain this sense of difference from the Continent, alongside a sense of British superiority, was accompanied by a lingering anti-Catholicism. Spain and France were seen here not just as military rivals in the power politics of Europe, they were, equally importantly, seen as religious adversaries and threats to Britain's established Protestant-dominated order. Catholicism was associated with the absolute monarchies of the *ancien regime* in France and with the obscurantism of its teachings and its reactionary social policies. In this way, some historians have attempted to trace the roots of Britain's recent Euroscepticism back to the Reformation and Henry VIII's split with Rome. Anti-Catholic legislation and sentiments continued to underpin British attitudes towards Continental Europe throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. They still weigh heavily on popular attitudes in some parts of the UK today. Anti-Catholic opinions were still being expressed in the 1950s and 1960s by opponents of European integration. The leading proponents of integration on the Continent were suspected by some in Britain of seeking to promote a Catholic-inspired project. Robert Schuman, for example, was 'said to be very much under the influence of the priests' and his plan 'a step in the consolidation of the Catholic "black international"'.¹

The belief that Britain stood apart from the Continent, that it represented the home of liberty and stability in the face of tyranny, chaos and revolution across the Channel, became a central part of the dominant national narrative in Britain in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The divine right monarchies of the French *ancien regime* and others like it were examples of European absolutism that were regarded with disdain in Britain. Louis XIV was a European tyrant seeking to establish a French hegemony over the entire Continent. The fall of the monarchy in France and the following revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes were seen in much the same light, as essentially dangerous, bent on imposing France's political control over the entire Continent, all this backed up by its ideological dominance.

Writers and politicians such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, the eminent nineteenth-century Whig, repeatedly set out this argument, comparing the stability of Britain's political system with what they saw as the political passions and violence on the Continent. Where Continental regimes veered between absolutism, reaction and revolution, the willingness to reform had allowed

1. Kenneth Younger quoted in Young, *Blessed Plot*, pp. 50-51.

Britain to avoid these unwelcome excesses. These same arguments were regularly repeated in later generations. The Continent continued to be widely represented as a source of disorder and chaos, in contrast to Britain's characteristic stability. The British historian Andrew Roberts has recently painted a similar picture. He compares the violence of the Continental revolutions of 1848, the drunken looting and pillaging of the insurgents, with what he describes as the damp squid of the Chartists' protests in London at the same time. 'The fire that had consumed Europe', Roberts writes, 'as so many times both before and afterwards—fizzled out in the very different political, historical and cultural climate of Britain'.¹ The national political and social contexts that differentiated Britain from its neighbours, identified by Roberts, were extended to include their constitutional make-ups. The rapidly changing regimes of Continental Europe—Roberts lists eight in France since 1789, five in Germany and four in Spain—are compared unfavourably to the stability that Britain has enjoyed. The contrast with France is most striking. The French government, Roberts writes, 'has been opened, shut and hurriedly moved more often than a dodgy street vendor's suitcase'.² The lessons he drew for the contemporary debate on Britain and Europe were clear to see.

Most twentieth-century analyses pursued the same insistence on Britain's fundamental difference from the Continent. The emergence of the ideologies of the revolutionary left in Russia and of the extreme right in Italy, Germany, Spain and elsewhere in the inter-war years left the UK as one of the few surviving homes of parliamentary democracy. The collapse of all the other major European democracies in 1940 further reinforced the sense of separation between Britain and the rest of Europe. If communism and fascism had failed to take root in Britain during the inter-war years, it was argued, it was because these were essentially un-British ideologies, alien to the British way of life. By the time of the 2016 referendum, however, and above all in the years that followed it, the image of Britain as a haven of political stability was severely tarnished. It shows very few signs of regaining its previous reputation. The French journalist Sylvia Kaufmann, for example, lamented how British democracy had been undermined by the Brexit debate: 'Once, we used to hold up British parliamentary life as an example,' she wrote, 'and watch prime minister's questions in the House of Commons with envy: for us, accustomed to semi-monarchical presidents of the Republic, this was the very Rolls-Royce of liberal democracy. Now that

1. Andrew Roberts, 'How British History has been different from European History', in *Goodbye Europe. Writers and Artists say Farewell*, 2017, pp. 35–36.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Rolls-Royce looks more like a dodgem.’¹ Numerous other foreign observers saw Brexit in the same light. There were some abroad who praised the merits of Brexit although few, even the most Eurosceptic among them, were willing to openly call for their own countries to take the same path out of the EU.

Memories of war

History, sometimes going back centuries, has frequently been used in various attempts to explain the ups and downs in the UK’s relationship with the rest of Europe, its initial unwillingness to accept the idea of European integration, and its later awkward partnership once it had entered the EEC in 1973. It is, however, the more recent history, especially that of the two world wars, that has had the greatest impact on how this relationship has evolved over the past decades. The generation of British leaders in power up to the early 1960s had lived through the First World War. Attlee, Churchill, Eden and Macmillan, successive Prime Ministers from 1945 to 1962, had all seen active service on the Western Front in France between 1914 and 1918. The following generation of Prime Ministers had all lived through the Second World War. James Callaghan served in the Royal Navy. Edward Heath served in the British Army and saw first-hand many of the horrors of that conflict as Europe was liberated in 1944-45, an experience that undoubtedly influenced his belief in the need for European peace and reconciliation, including the creation of an integrated Europe.

While the two world wars inevitably had an impact on all those who lived through them, and indeed on those born after 1945 as well, these experiences varied widely. The memories and the lessons or conclusions drawn from them, equally so. How later generations have looked at these conflicts has also differed, although in many important ways a deeply rooted collective memory around certain aspects of the war has been created and has become central to one of the most influential national narratives. Memories, however, even personal ones, can be distorted, and we do not always see our past as precisely or as accurately as we may believe. This applies both to individual and collective national memories. No matter how accurate or inaccurate they are, and no matter how much they are open to various interpretations, they remain an essential part of how we, individually and as a nation, see our past, our present, and our future. Never more so than in how the British and the Continental Europeans see the past, present, and future of their relationship.

1. *The Guardian*, 4 August 2019.

The overriding image of the First World War in Britain is less the victory won than the horrors that it entailed. 11 November 1918 is commemorated as *Remembrance Day*; 8 May 1945 as VE (*Victory in Europe*) Day. The slaughter of the Somme and Ypres is still well-known in Britain, a symbol of a war that can never be seen as a triumph or even as a true victory. For the generation that fought in the First World War, the Continent was seen primarily as a battlefield, concentrated in the north of France and Belgium. After 1918, the understandable sentiment across large parts of British society was that the country should avoid any future involvement in a Continental conflict and that it should keep its distance, looking instead to its more easily managed imperial connections with the Dominions. The rise of oppressive regimes on the Continent in the 1920s and 1930s, and the ongoing tensions in the relations between the various Continental powers, reinforced this British desire to avoid a close involvement in European affairs. Such sentiments, however, came up against overriding security concerns. These meant that the UK could not afford to turn its back on Europe and turn in on itself by adopting an isolationist stance. This was also the conclusion of Winston Churchill and the government in June 1940 when the decision was taken to reject Hitler's peace overtures and to continue the war, defeat Nazi Germany, and liberate the occupied European countries. This decision indicates that Britain's involvement in Continental European affairs is unavoidable. While some have interpreted Britain's lone position in Europe following the fall of France in June 1940 as evidence of Britain's 'otherness', of its separation from the Continent, and the comfort and advantages that can be found in such a position, others have seen this as a clear sign of Britain's commitment to the Continent. By the time of the 2016 referendum, the Second World War had been over for more than 70 years. Yet this conflict continued to leave its mark on the debate. Indeed, it was a favourite reference, especially for Brexiteers.

Lessons of War: the high seas and the Continent

The wartime experiences and records of Britain, France and the other future members of the EEC/EU were in one very important way quite different, a difference that continued to have significant repercussions for their attitudes and relations for many years after the end of hostilities. These differences, and the ways they were being interpreted and highlighted in some quarters, still played an important part in the Brexit debates in 2016.

Britain, alone among the major European powers, was neither defeated nor occupied in the Second World War. Its experience of the war was, therefore, fundamentally different from those of France, Germany, and the other Europeans. France had gone through the debacle of defeat in May-June 1940 and the humiliation of the ensuing occupation and collaboration. De Gaulle and the Free French may have partially saved France's national honour, but the slate could never be wiped clean. Italy had been defeated; the Benelux countries were defeated and occupied. Germany's experience was, perhaps, the most damaging of all. Its record of aggression against its European neighbours, its Nazi ideology, and the horrors it inflicted on millions of other Europeans meant that it was, for some time after the end of the War, a European pariah. Its division between East and West added to its international humiliation and to its determination to seek a new path that would allow its national and international revival. Germany had been brought low by the war. A new united Western Europe gave it an opportunity to bury the past and to allow it to reaffirm its commitment to European civilisation and its values. Doing so would also make its European neighbours feel more comfortable and safer with Germany as a friend rather than as an enemy.

West Germany's post-war priority was, therefore, to achieve its rehabilitation in Europe. Taking an active, but not leading, part in the creation of the new integrated European structure offered an attractive way to achieve that goal. In lesser ways, the other future founding members of the EEC, the so-called 'Six', were motivated by a similar desire to break with the past, particularly the immediate past that showed them in such an unflattering light. Their regimes, the French Third Republic, the Benelux democracies, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany, had all failed in different ways in 1939-45. The three Benelux countries returned to the same pre-war regimes; the three other regimes disappeared, most dramatically in Germany and Italy. New regimes and, for the most part, new leaders across the 'Six' looked to make a new start, both at the national level and in Western Europe as a whole. Oliver Franks, the British Ambassador in Washington from 1948 to 1952, identified a different state of mind in post-war Britain and on the Continent where there was, he said, a 'decay of loyalty to the... historical nation-states. People feel that they can no longer place all their hope and trust in their particular sovereign nation... It is a state of mind born of defeat, occupation, and the gulf between those who collaborated and those who resisted.'¹ For Britain, the conclusions drawn from the War were quite different.

1. Reith lectures 1954, 'Britain and the Tide of World Affairs, Lecture 4: The end of the old world', 28 November 1954.

All the countries of Europe, including Britain, emerged from the war damaged and weakened. They were confronted by many of the same problems, and they all faced an uncertain future. Their dire financial situations and the fragility of their war-torn economies necessitated a fundamental reconstruction. Several of them were attempting to deal with the same challenges in their colonial empires. In one important way, however, Britain now stood apart from and, in British eyes, above the others. Its wartime record of resistance and final victory gave it a prestige that distinguished it from its Continental European neighbours. Its international status as one of the 'big three' alongside the United States and the Soviet Union added to this sense of superiority and difference. The prestige it enjoyed was recognised by many on the Continent and this incited many of them to encourage Britain to assume an active, even leading, role in Europe. However, the post-war British government of Clement Attlee and the Conservative governments that followed were unwilling to reconsider the fundamentals of Britain's international position. The Foreign Office, the Treasury and the other key government ministries, both the Labour and Conservative parties, and the great majority of the British public all took the same view. Britain was still firmly attached to its Empire-Commonwealth even after the first steps had been taken along the path of imperial withdrawal (Indian independence in 1947, British withdrawal from Palestine in 1948...).

Britain's political, commercial, financial, and sentimental relations with its Empire-Commonwealth were an essential element in its post-war thinking about its place in the world and its relations to Europe. The relationship with Washington was no less significant. For Britain, one of the key lessons taken from the War was that the support of the United States had been decisive. The role of the Soviet Union in the final victory was perhaps even greater, but in the context of the Cold War this was harder to recognise publicly. And it was the emergence of the Cold War, a consideration that dominated much of British thinking about its role in the world for the next four decades, that established the Anglo-American relationship as an essential element in British foreign policy. This continued to have a direct and significant impact on Britain's thinking towards Europe and European integration as it developed over the following decades. Holding onto what the British (less so the Americans) liked to see as their 'special relationship' with Washington became the cornerstone of British foreign policy.

The growing importance attached to the relationship with Washington, however, did not mean Britain turning its back on either Europe or the Empire-Commonwealth. All three had to be maintained at the same time. The balancing

act that this required became one of the principal difficulties facing all British governments over the following decades. Britain's closeness to the United States has also reinforced the reticence of many on the Continent, most notably in France, about its suitability as a European partner. The portrayal of the British as a part of a wider 'Anglo-Saxon' community, as junior partners to their American cousins, was widespread in France. It remains so today. If the British are a branch of the family of 'anglo-saxons' can they then be considered Europeans? This questioning of Britain's European credentials on the Continent has reinforced similar doubts on the British side and led many to ask whether they are welcome in Europe. Britain's preference for the United States over Europe is an accusation that is often made, or a conclusion reached, in France where its closeness to the Americans is seen as inhibiting its place and role in European integration. The image of Britain as an American Trojan Horse allowing the Americans, in the most deceptive way possible, to gain access to the European citadel has been hard to shake off. The British have always rejected this accusation, although in this case it may be that the French saw things more clearly than the British did.

The idea of a 'special relationship' between London and Washington emerged from their shared wartime experience between 1941 and 1945. The idea was developed further during the Cold War. It was Winston Churchill's vehement defence of this relationship that left such a deep mark on de Gaulle's memory and which influenced his attitude towards the British applications to enter the EEC in the 1960s. De Gaulle met Churchill on the eve of the Normandy landings, from which he and the Free French were excluded. Almost two decades later, de Gaulle recalled this meeting. Churchill, he said, created an awful scene, shouting at the top of his voice: *'Dites-vous bien, de Gaulle, que, chaque fois que j'aurai à choisir entre l'Europe et le grand large, je choisirai toujours le grand large! Quand j'aurai à choisir entre vous, de Gaulle, et Roosevelt, je choisirai toujours Roosevelt!'*¹ Whereas this scene has been largely forgotten in the UK, it has been highlighted in numerous French accounts.

Replaying history: press, television, and film

De Gaulle's account of his encounter with Churchill in June 1944 is one example of how the past has continued, long after the event, to influence the European debate. In the case of the Churchill-de Gaulle meeting, this has been related by historians, in school textbooks and has been replayed numerous times

1. Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle. La France redevient la France*, 1994, pp. 370-71.