ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

The Power of History: British and German Views of the European, National and Imperial Past

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Historical traditions and associations often form the unconscious or semiconscious ground on which political debates take place. And that ground does, in one form or another, shape those debates and contribute to their outcomes. This essay explores how different views of European, national and imperial history in Germany and the United Kingdom have helped to frame attitudes towards European integration in these countries and thereby also impacted on Brexit.

A good place to start this exploration is Speyer Cathedral. In April 1989 Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, welcomed British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to his homeland in an attempt to improve what had been for quite some time a rather awkward personal and political relationship. He led her to the burial places of the medieval German emperors in Speyer Cathedral. There, he drew Thatcher's foreign policy adviser, Charles Powell, behind a buttress and whispered in his ear: now that the Prime Minister had met him, Kohl, in his homeland, in the heart of Europe, so close to the French–German border, amidst more than a thousand years of European history, she would certainly understand who he was and how he felt: German and European at the same time. 'You have to convince her!', he admonished Powell. One can rather doubt whether Powell intended to do anything of the kind but, in any case, if he did, his hopes were to be disappointed, because as soon as she was on the plane back to London Thatcher sat down, kicked off her shoes and sighed: 'oh my god, this man is so German!'

This anecdote tells us something about the rather tense relationship between Kohl and Thatcher, whose personal chemistry was famously bad. It also hints, however, at some deeper and more widespread problems in British–German relations, and also in European history more generally. These problems go beyond Kohl's and Thatcher's personal likes and dislikes and may help to explain why the United Kingdom and Germany rarely saw eye to eye on Europe.

At first sight, the divergence of views on Europe may seem puzzling, as the United Kingdom and Germany share numerous interests and aims in European policy. British and German attitudes towards the EU budget are as similar as their views on the economic agenda, industrial policy, competition and free trade. In addition, where more general views on the role of the state or the rule of law are concerned, mainstream German notions often used to be and still are closer to British than to French ones. To explain the underlying difficulties and differences of opinion between German views on Europe and European integration on the one hand, and British attitudes on the other, my essay offers three historical reasons: starting with different experiences of reconstruction and recovery from war after 1945 (I), then going back to notions of the nation state shaped in the nineteenth century (II) and finally to specific views of empire reaching as far back as the early modern period (III).

I.

The first point worth emphasising is the different ways in which the history of European integration is narrated and the manner in which it is interwoven with German and British national history after 1945. From a German point of view the history of European integration has

always been told as a success story. lt is a story of a phoenix rising from the ashes, the comeback of a continent in ruins after two devastating wars, a story of how enmity and hatred were overcome, how the future was secured through cooperation across national borders and how a peaceful and democratic Europe replaced the follies of nationalism, tyranny and war. Astonishingly enough, this was a narrative that could be shared by both perpetrators and victims of German aggression.

From a German point of view, European integration thus offered the way back into the circle of civilised nations after the crimes and barbarism of Nazi dictatorship. More specifically, it opened up the opportunity for reconciliation with France after decades of war and conflict by fencing in German power and finding a seemingly permanent solution to the protracted problem of German 'semi-hegemony' (Ludwig Dehio) in Europe. For Germany, rapprochement with the former 'arch-enemy' in the West became the central pillar of the European project. Apart from that, in German popular perception European integration was and still is inextricably intertwined with the so-called economic miracle of the 1950s and the increasing prosperity of the 1960s. The *trentes glorieuses* after 1945 form the core of what one could call the German myth of European integration.

From a British perspective things look rather different. The UK entered the European Community with inconvenient timing right at the beginning of a period of economic and political stagnation. More so, it joined a club whose rules had already been fixed without regard to specific British viewpoints and had to be adapted, slowly and rather painfully, to take British interests into account. Thus, from a British point of view, the process of European integration was not linked with post-war recovery but rather with the economic and political problems of the 1970s and early 1980s. The subsequent boom period of the later 1980s was portrayed by the Conservative government in the UK not so much as a result of the European relaunch of the years after 1984–5 but rather as a national endeavour, achieved against the obstructions thrown into its path by 'Brussels bureaucracy'. This forms the core of what one could call the British counter myth of European integration.

Moreover, the UK was different not only from Germany but from most of continental Europe in so far as it had not experienced defeat and the collapse of the established political order. Whereas on the continent most political institutions had been discredited by war and occupation, in the UK they had been validated by victory. This is another reason why the success story of the phoenix rising from the ashes did not resonate in the UK in the same way as it did in Germany and large parts of the European continent.

II.

The idea of the alleged irrevocability of European integration combined with the concept of an 'ever closer union' enshrined in the preamble of the Treaty of Rome forms the core of the European integration narrative. For a long time many historians of the European project have contributed to this narrative by telling European history after 1945 as a kind of one-way street to ever closer cooperation and integration, neglecting or ignoring processes of fragmentation, disintegration or de-Europeanisation. The unification of Europe as an 'unfinished story' (Wilfried Loth) of progress, peace and prosperity took centre stage in a new Whig interpretation of history, transferring the faith in the collective future once exclusively reserved for the nation state to a supranational European level.

Again, to German eyes and ears this has looked and sounded rather more unexceptional and self-evident than to British ones, at least until very recently. In his speeches in the 1990s Helmut Kohl proclaimed time and again that it was his main aim to make European integration irrevocable. This was, it seems, one of his main motives for going along with European Monetary Union (EMU) after François Mitterrand had succeeded to persuade him that without the Euro, harmony between France and a reunified Germany would no longer be possible.

For Kohl, EMU was a political, not an economic, project. In this, he might have been guided by the idea that the creation of the Euro would serve the same function and have the same beneficial effects as the German currency reform of 1948, which produced the Deutschmark in the western German occupation zones (soon to become the Federal Republic of Germany), and helped trigger the long post-war boom, becoming an important part of (West) German national identity. To be sure, there were cautionary voices in the Bundesbank, in the Ministry of Finance and even in the Federal Chancellery trying to kick plans for EMU into the long grass. In the end, however, Kohl prevailed.

To explain Kohl's success in persuading the Germans to give up their cherished Deutschmark, one could argue that more deeply-rooted historical traditions and patterns of thought also played a role. There is, for example, a German tendency to view the European integration of the late twentieth century through the prism of German national unification in the nineteenth century and to depict the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and the European Monetary Union as precursors of a future Political Union just as the German Customs Union of 1834 allegedly prepared the ground for the foundation of the German nation state in 1871. In 1984, to mark the 150th anniversary of the Customs Union, the Federal Republic even issued a Five Deutschmark coin with the inscription Zollverein – Deutschland – EWG – Europa.

Before 1871, it could be argued, many Germans believed a German nation already existed spiritually and culturally, but not yet in political reality. Today, some still think of Europe in a similar vein: it is already there, but not yet ready and therefore in constant need of fulfilment. In this context, the notion of an 'ever closer union' of European nations and their states strikes a specific emotional chord in Germany. The nation states of the twentieth century will be subsumed, in the Hegelian sense of *aufgehoben*, in a European Union in the same way as the smaller German states were subsumed in the German Empire after 1871.

Even amongst moderately Europhile Britons this kind of sentiment has never been widely shared. lt was not by accident that David Cameron wanted to secure a UK opt-out from the treaty commitment to an 'ever closer union' in his negotiations with the other twenty-seven EU members in February 2016. Thomas Kielinger, who served as London correspondent for the German daily *Die Welt* for many years, once told me that, in his view, Chancellor Kohl lost the fight for British hearts and minds at the very moment he declared the process of European integration to be irrevocable.

In the UK, on the other hand, many people perceived and still perceive European integration to be a matter of practical (economic, political, strategic) pros and cons and not a matter of life and death. When Helmut Kohl proclaimed the Euro to be a question of peace or war twenty years ago, he found a receptive audience in Germany. When David Cameron used the same argument during the 2016 referendum campaign, he did not receive a similar degree of approval in the UK (to put it mildly).

This unemotional and pragmatic view of all things European may be part of the reason why there was, in some quarters in the UK after Brexit, an exaggerated confidence that national interest and economic prudence would in the end convince the remaining twenty-seven member states (and certainly Germany) to reach a compromise with the UK that was in everybody's best economic interest (and certainly in the interest of the German car industry). This view was always far too optimistic, because for many people on the continent the European Union was never mainly an economic project. It was a political project first and foremost. Thus, for the British negotiators, the Brexit talks were about finding a compromise solution to a political and diplomatic problem between sovereign states. For their European counterparts, they were about dealing with secession.

III.

A third aspect of British–German misunderstandings over Europe arises from historical traditions which go even further back than the nineteenth century. Echoes of the Holy Roman Empire which ceased to exist in 1806 reverberate through the following centuries until the current day. The German historian Golo Mann, son of Thomas Mann, once remarked that the Old Empire was more important for what it became after it perished, as a legend, idea, imagination and memory, rather than for what it had been while it actually existed.

For a long time German historians used to emphasise the negative impact the myth of the Old Reich had, first because it delayed democracy and the nation state in the centre of Europe, later because it allegedly served as a bridge between Hitler and the conservative bourgeoisie in Germany. One could argue, however, that the memory of the Old Empire also lives on in German visions of Europe. You can hear its echo when there is talk of universal ideas, of a supranational notion of the state or of a cross-border community based on law. All of this has decidedly positive connotations in the current political discourse in Germany (or at least it used to have until very recently).

This is the discursive context in which German historians like Georg Schmidt of Jena University and others emphasise analogies or functional similarities between the Holy Roman Empire of the early modern period and the European Union today. Both are portrayed as multi-tiered systems of governance which secure peace, frustrate aggressive or expansionist designs by its most powerful members and produce compromise solutions within a highly complex political environment with numerous actors of differing size, status and power.

According to this reading neither the Old Reich nor the EU exclusively shape the identities of their members to the detriment of any other kind of allegiance. However, they can supposedly lay claim to a minimum amount of loyalty, thereby encouraging the kind of multiple identity fitting for the periods before and after the age of the unfettered nation state. This is an important but often neglected part of the historical background for German ideas of political union in Europe.

British perceptions of the Holy Roman Empire and its heritage are different. Cambridge historian Brendan Simms, for instance, criticises the very aspects of the Old Reich which many of his German colleagues think are most commendable and helpful in the early twenty-first century. He deplores that the Germans had imposed large parts of their early modern political culture on the EU, particularly 'the inclination to transfer political disputes into the realm of the law, to have endless and fruitless debates and to concentrate on procedure instead of substance – with the effect that the current EU resembles more and more the old Holy Roman Empire' (author's translation from Brendan Simms and Benjamin Zeeb, *Europa am Abgrund: Plädoyer für die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa*, 2016). For Simms the EU represents exactly the wrong kind of a political union. In his view a much more effective and durable example of a political union is the Anglo–Scottish union of 1707, when England and Scotland terminated centuries of military, diplomatic and economic rivalry. The aim of their union was to finish a long festering conflict and to combine English and Scottish resources in order to fight more effectively against common external enemies and to project British power in the world.

lt was a union that left both England and Scotland with their own customs and arrangements concerning most aspects of domestic policy (from law to education) but merged their power in the realm of foreign and security policy. In this respect, the Anglo–Scottish union was the complete opposite of today's European Union, which has merged many aspects of domestic policy but left foreign affairs and defence matters relatively untouched in the hands of the various nation states. In power political terms, European integration was about the internal containment of power (namely, German power) and not about the external projection of power into the wider world (that was left to NATO and the transatlantic partnership with the United States).

Cambridge political scientist Michael Kenny and others have demonstrated how important imperial nostalgia was for Brexit. One could also argue, however, that a more hidden nostalgia for another empire, the Old Reich before 1806, continues to inspire German thinking about the European project. This is all the more remarkable (and potentially divisive) as it clashes with yet another set of recollections of empire held by people in East Central Europe. For many of them, the Habsburg Empire – not wholly unlike the Soviet Empire after 1945 – evokes memories of oppression and dependency rather than peace and order.

IV.

To be sure, none of this was explicitly addressed in the debates about Brexit either in the UK or in Germany. Nevertheless, historical experiences and cultural imprints do play a vivid political role and frame the way we look at the world around us. And, like it or not, our perceptions are still often enough shaped by national traditions and perspectives. This means that Europe – the Europe that exists in reality as well as the Europe we dream about – looks different if you view it through the prism of different national histories. To return to where we started: in Speyer Cathedral Helmut Kohl felt surrounded and justified by a thousand years of common European history whereas for Margaret Thatcher the German emperors who were buried there only represented one more failed attempt to unite the continent under one authority. This was the deeper reason for the dialogue of the deaf that Kohl and Thatcher were conducting at the grave of Henry IV.