The myth of a liberal Brexit: How Brexiteers (mis)used history in their quest for British 'freedom'

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which those advocating for Britain to leave the European Union, before and since the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership, have drawn on historical parallels to mobilise popular support for their position. In light of the narrow margin of victory for Leave and the prevalence of emotionally-driven arguments as a counter to the rational proposals of so-called 'experts', it is important to understand the historical rhetoric of the Leave campaign, and how it brought them victory.

Noting that many of the Brexiteers consider themselves to be students of history, this paper argues that the use of historical myths about a British struggle for freedom against a European oppressor was a decisive factor in igniting visceral popular support for Brexit. The essay will analyse the ways in which the experiences of the Second World War were mobilised both during the first EU referendum in 1975 and in the 2016 campaign. It will go on to problematize Brexiteers' attempts to use a sense of both their own powerlessness against the British pro-Remain establishment, and the wider sense that Britain had always suffered under German and French dominance, to create a myth of the historical 'underdog'.

Finally, it seeks to critique the relationship between the contradictory 'underdog myth' and the myth of reviving imperial ties, exposing them as fundamentally incompatible and ultimately inaccurate readings of British history. Throughout, the paper will seek to understand what a "liberal Brexit" actually means, and whether a historical approach can help us to understand such an idea.

The slogan of Vote Leave, the official campaign to the UK out of the European Union in 2016, was "Vote Leave, take back control" (Vote Leave 2016). An earlier iteration of the slogan, which had been used in the campaign's October 2015 launch video, read simply "Vote leave, take control". By altering the slogan later in the campaign, campaign director Dominic Cummings firmly rooted his message in the past. The word "back" implies an orientation towards history, and implies an opportunity for Britain to go back to time when it had control over its borders, its economy, and its laws. However, the historical orientation of Vote Leave's campaign slogan raises more questions than answers. From whom exactly did Britain need to take back control, and what sort of control existed previously for Britain to reclaim? This paper seeks to understand the ways in which the campaigns to leave the European Union - both the official Vote Leave and the associated Leave.EU and Grassroots Out campaigns - used historical allusions and parallels to create an emotional case to leave.

This is not simply a paper about why Brexit happened -- or, to put it more precisely given how precarious a deal with the EU now looks -- why the British people voted narrowly for leave in June 2016. The factors bringing about leave were numerous, not least deeply held concerns about uncontrolled immigration, widespread distrust of institutions, and shrewd political campaigning. Journalists and academics have begun the job of piecing together these myriad factors. I advance an argument about one element of this complex constellation of causes: the ways in which Brexiteers used and misused historical images and even historical myth to generate a visceral, emotional public support for leave, and the energy to win a narrow victory in the referendum. Examining in particular the most intense period of the referendum campaign from March to June 2016, as well as a number of relevant allusions to history since the vote, I look specifically at those who shaped the narrative – the politicians, strategists, and the media they deployed – and their ultimately successful attempts to convince 52% of voters to back Brexit.

It also seems more fruitful to focus on the leave side's use of historical imagery than the pro-EU side, because Vote Leave was more overtly rooted in images of returning Britain to an imagined era of past greatness. Moreover, the leave side appealed to the 'heart', and remain, primarily through its campaign organ "Britain Stronger in Europe", to the 'head'. By attempting to appeal to people's rational instincts, above all the potential economic risks of leaving the European Union, the grounds on which to build an emotional argument were ceded to the Leave side. A significant part of this emotional argument was built around mobilising historical memories of Britain's relationship with Europe in the Second World War, through to the 1975 referendum, and the country's imperial legacies. The 2016 vote was only the third national referendum in Britain's history, and one of the few opportunities for public discussion of the country's role in the world. As countries seek to understand their role in a rapidly changing global landscape, citizens, politicians and campaigners alike often turn to history to shape the emotional case for their position. Here, theories of historical memory and the shaping of national consciousness enable us to see the importance of historical allusions, parallels and myths as a tool of political argument. In view of a complex political event such as Brexit, with so many underlying causes and trigger factors, the role of history in the debate is worthy of more attention. Whilst political scientists are perhaps best placed to analyse the underlying social and political causes of Brexit, it is also important to highlight visceral emotional appeals rooted in historical narratives, and their power in the referendum. After all, in spite of Nigel Farage's claim when the result became clear that his side had won "without a single shot being fired", this was a campaign which resulted in the death of a Member of Parliament, Jo Cox, murdered while campaigning for Remain in her constituency (Saul 2016).

Many of the key actors in the Brexit debate, such as a Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, see themselves as advocates of a "liberal" Brexit, with freedom from EU regulations and directions, global free trade, and equal immigration standards for all countries, at the core of their underlying philosophy for advocating to leave. Others, such as Nigel Farage and those associated with UKIP and the right of the Conservative Party, have much more "illiberal" motivations, emphasising the need to reduce immigration, from Europe and elsewhere, tinged with years of xenophobic rhetoric and campaigning against the EU (Behr 2016). Others, such as the political strategists working behind the scenes, simply wanted to mobilise whichever message resonated most with voters to win the day, and they played a crucial role in shaping the outcome. Given such disparities, and the differing underlying motivations, let alone visions for the post-Brexit future, historical narratives of the British underdog's desire for freedom and control over its own destiny were one of the only areas around which Brexiteers could unite.

The term "Brexiteer" itself, although not generally used as a term of self-identification, has historical allusions, as it references the *French* novel, the Three Musketeers, published in 1844 by Alexandre Dumas. In an August 2018 piece for

the *Spectator*, Greg Hall explored leading, male, Brexiteers' fascination with history. Their references to history during and since the referendum were in some cases almost comically specific. Oxford history graduate, Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, described Theresa May's Chequers' proposal for post-Brexit Britain as "the greatest vassalage since King John paid homage to Philip II at Le Goulet in 1200" (Hall 2018). Boris Johnson, also famous for igniting anti-EU sentiment through flowery rhetoric, used his weekly column in the *Telegraph* newspaper to declare infamously March 2016 that the EU "wants a superstate, just as Hitler did" (Ross 2016) . Johnson had studied ancient history in his Classics degree, and the intellectual architect of modern Tory Euroscepticism, Daniel Hannan MEP, as well as Douglas Carswell, UKIP's only MP, both studied history too. Michael Gove had not, but he presided over school reforms which "sought to establish a 'narrative of British progress' in the history curriculum' (Hall 2018). To illustrate the bias he sees for Brexit among those who had studied the Glorious Revolution, or written about Churchill's heroic resistance against Germany - as Johnson had famously done in his 2014 book *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*, Hall contrasted the educational experiences of Remainers. At the top of the campaign, Remainers were more likely to have studied law (in the cases of Keir Starmer QC, Tony Blair, and Anna Soubry) or Philosophy, Politics and Economics, the much maligned interdisciplinary Oxford programmes (see David Cameron, Yvette Cooper, and Will Straw, the director of Britain Stronger in Europe). Hall cites these examples as merely interesting coincidences which can help to elucidate the differing approaches taken during the Brexit campaign on the two sides of the debate, but does not claim to provide a systematic analysis.

Hall misses, however, the highly gendered aspect to the contrasting educational backgrounds of those debating the virtues of Brexit on each side. Of course, the overwhelming presence of men at the top of both campaigns is indicative of wider problems in the distribution of power within the British political class. However, it is still striking that, on the 'leave' side, the self-professed history buffs Hall refers to are exclusively male. Their fascination with history appears to take a very particular form, one which emphasises the role of the 'great man', as in the weight Johnson placed on Churchill's role alone in making history, and on the 'heroic' episodes of British history, when our boys resisted European oppression. To complicate matters, the personal histories of the actors, and their differing approaches to the use of history, are significantly intertwined, not least because many of them attended the same high schools and universities. The actors went into the campaign with the inter-personal rivalries from their Oxford days over politics, class or student elections (as in the case of Gove, Cameron, and Johnson), and in many ways the referendum served primarily as a stage for an intra-Conservative Party battle to settle old scores and hangovers from the rhetorical games of the Oxford Union, the world-famous debating society, more than as a stage for discussing the future of the country (Shipman 2017, 152-3). The most detailed studies of the campaign, such as the journalist Tim Shipman's *All Out War*, are imbued with a sense that the main actors' personal chances to go down as a 'great man' of history, or at least a future prime minister, shaped their positions during the campaign. Such a desire to settle old scores, and to be remembered, appears to have left the option open to draw dangerous and untrue historical parallels between Nazi Germany and the EU. At the core, whether their vision for Britain after Brexit was more liberal or isolationist, Brexiteers could, and still can, draw on powerful, sometimes verbose, historical parallels to evoke nostalgic arguments on the need to regain sovereignty, or "take back control", as their slogan put it. The jurists and economists on the Remain side had, arguably, a better grasp of the facts and the potential risks of Brexit, but Vote Leave's recourse to historical cases appears to have proved emotionally more effective.

It is important to understand, however, that the politicians who knew enough history to see its potential as a powerful tool during the campaign, were, and are, not the only relevant actors in the Vote Leave campaign. Although mentioning his name, Hall's article gives little attention to arguably the most important cast member in the entire Brexit camp, at least when it came to shaping the narrative during the campaign: Dominic Cummings, the Campaign Director of Vote Leave, and himself an Oxford graduate in Ancient and Modern History. Particularly after the Electoral Commission designated Vote Leave the official campaign in April 2016, so-called 'spin doctors', and those on each campaign who understand how to shape political narratives, played an especially crucial role. Cummings was known to be obsessed with nineteenth century statesmen and military strategists, on which he had read a huge number of books since resigning from then-Education Secretary Michael Gove's office in 2014. He had studied Otto von Bismarck at university and was fascinated by the "truth" spoken by "Thucydides, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu [and] Mao" on strategic theory (Shipman 2017, 93). As the man primarily in charge of Vote Leave's campaign messaging, and given his idol Bismarck's assertion that "people never lie so much as after a hunt, during a war or before an election", the Brexiteers' use of history, myth-making, and outright falsehoods, cannot easily be dismissed as simply unconscious or coincidental. Cummings had consulted books and sources on these figures directly prior to taking over leadership of Vote Leave, and his own remarks to

journalists reflecting on the campaign reference this directly. Moreover, the allusions Cummings made in his reflections were not only historical in nature. They referred explicitly to war and military strategy. Shipman's *All Out War* and the 2019 TV drama, *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, which draws on Shipman's work, also make explicit parallels between the campaign and a war-time scenario. Each suggests that Cummings' Vote Leave was at war on all fronts, including with other anti-EU groups. He fought a campaign which threw caution to the wind, using every possible, including historical myth, to elevate himself to the status of great military strategists he so respected (Shipman 2017, 102-3). As this paper will consider, this conception of the campaign as a civil war necessitates an analysis of how Brexiteers drew on British war-time experience to conceive of their role as underdog warriors for Brexit in the campaign. Again, the name "Brexiteer" imbues our understanding of the campaign with further war parallels.

Prevailing theories on the role of historical memory in shaping political debates provide support for the idea that historically-grounded narratives are exceptionally important in shaping public consciousness. As the German historian Heinrich August Winkler has argued, it is commonplace in democratic society for competing images of history to compete against each other for primacy (Winkler 2004)[i]. He points to the presence of *Geschichtspolitik*, or a political debate about history, as a healthy feature of a functioning democracy, because societies require at least a baseline consensus on the stories that unite them as a people. Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist, was most influential in conceptualising this idea in his 1940 work, *The Collective Memory*, pioneering the idea that outside individual memory, there is also group memory. Membership of society, and participation in a group with a shared conception of the past, strongly shapes each individual's understanding of history (Winkler 2004, 12). These understandings of the role of history in political debate provide a framework through which to analyse collective memory in the context of Brexit, and the importance that historical narratives play in shaping political beliefs.

Theories of historical memory, such as that of Edgar Wolfrum, have also stressed the fine line between collective memory of a group's shared past, and a mobilisation of historical myths, not based on informed historical interpretations, on selective memory. In the case of Brexit in particular, one must ask whose shared history was mobilized to greatest effect in the referendum debate. As has been argued above, politicians and campaigners deploy in unacademic or ill-informed ways, or base their assertions and parallels on myth as a way to legitimise their own political conduct (Wolfrum, 6). As Wolfrum noted: "The historical profession does not have a monopoly on history and memory. History has been and is deployed as a weapon, as a tool of political combat against internal and external opponents. (Wolfrum 2002, 6).[ii] Brexit was voted for in spite of 300 historians signing a letter against it, indicative of a more general fall of trust in academics and the country's liberal instiutions (Hall 2018).Thus, whilst history can often be an honest element of political debate, it is more appropriate in the case of Brexit to focus on the ways in which those outside the historical profession have mobilized aspects of history as a weapon, and used aspects of Britain's past selectively to construct an image of British resistance to European dominance, especially during the Second World War. Wolfrum also reminds us that a significant component of mobilizing history in political debate is the ability to block out and *forget* aspects of the past which do not fit the narrative one is trying to construct. In spite of Brexiteers' desire to paint themselves as warrior underdogs in a fight against the establishment for British freedom, their parallel insistence on increased ties to the Commonwealth instead of Europe completely ignores Britain's colonial past, as this paper will go on to discuss.

In light of theories about the role of collective memory in nation states, one might also raise questions about exactly whose history the Brexiteers' looked to in their rhetoric and imagery. Most of the lead actors mentioned above were English, and could not claim to represent the diverse histories of other parts of the UK. Ultimately, whilst England and Wales ultimately voted for Brexit, Scotland and Northern Ireland, came to back Remain (BBC 2016). Although Brexiteers claimed to be representing the history of an entire nation, their cavalier attitude towards the future of Northern Ireland and its border with Ireland, for example, demonstrated a woeful understanding of the sensitivity of Irish history and the possibility for renewed violence of the island after Brexit (see O'Toole 2018). Notably, the sense of English nationalism in the Brexiteers' attitudes to Ireland sincerely undermines claims that they sought a truly "liberal Brexit" which could free all of the UK from the shackles of the past. Johnson, Gove and Rees-Mogg, in particular, in spite of their claims to desiring a globally-orientated, liberal Brexit, were only too happy to exploit underlying English nationalism for their own political gain. This area is certainly worthy of further examination.

In any case, drawing on theories of historical and collective memory highlights the stark disagreements in British society over the country's role in the world in light of its past. This is particularly evident when the 2016 referendum is viewed in the context of 1975. Britain first voted on its relationship with Europe in a referendum in 1975, the first national vote of its kind, having joined the European Economic Community in 1972. With regards to collective memory, as Robert Saunders noted in his recent book on the 1975 experience, voters in the first European referendum were "closer to the end of the First World War than votes in 2016 were to the Second" (Saunders, 23). Even the younger generation in 1975 had, through their parents' experiences, a clear sense of the possibility of war on the continent. In some cities, the bomb damage was still visible thirty years on, and the anniversary of Victory in Europe was celebrated a month before the referendum. Exactly thirty one years after D-Day, the result of the referendum, that Britain would remain a member of the European Economic Community were announced. After the horrors of war, the use of the poppy on Britain in Europe posters, alongside a dove of peace for its logo, created strongly positive associations between the European Community, and its founders' visions of peace in Europe. Some publications went further, criticising the anti-Community campaigns of playing to destructive nationalist tendencies, with one claiming: 'Nationalism kills'. All, however, had the dove at their core, drawing the observer back to a fundamentally positive message. The campaign was also able to use both the public anniversary of Victory in Europe Day to remind voters of a day which many had not dared to imagine during the darkest days of the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, with the slogan: "On VE Day we celebrated the beginnings of peace. Vote Yes to make sure we keep it" (Saunders, 29). It should not be forgotten that the 1975 debate took place at the height of the Cold War, and that the risk of war with the USSR was profound. Such references were perceived as authentic because they were rooted in personal experience. Prime Minister Edward Heath had defended the city of Liverpool during the Blitz, for example. Others promoting the case for membership then had been awarded the Military Cross, and even most on the anti-Community side, including Enoch Powell, had also fought in the war. The 'Yes to Europe' campaign was able to mobilize positive historically-grounded arguments about peace and stability in Europe on the basis of shared historical and personal memory, which proved extremely powerful in the campaign.

In 2016, by contrast, any references by the Remain side to the potential for war on the continent were dismissed as 'Project Fear' (Shipman, 234). The Prime Minister's office briefed David Cameron's 9 May 2016 speech to the press in such a way that the *Daily Mail* splashed with headline: 'EU VOTE: NOW PM WARNS OF WAR AND GENOCIDE'. In fact the speech simply made reference to the need to remain 'close' to our European neighbours and the memory of World Wars I and II, the Battles of Blenheim and Waterloo, and the Spanish Armada to make an argument about the need for European security (Shipman 2017, 235). The reference to 'World War III', as the speech became known on the leave side, was a fabrication of Eurosceptic newspapers, and not actually part of the speech. The public, with little collective memory of war, did not see Cameron's attempt to mobilise historical memories of war as credible, and Shipman notes this speech as the point at which a significant section of the public lost complete trust in Cameron and the establishment. The parallel cases of 1975 and 2016 therefore demonstrate that both the remain and leave camps attempted to use history in their arguments, and that, as Winkler's understanding of historical memory showed, need not be mobilised for a negative or destructive purpose in public discourse. Rather, the 1975 case demonstrates that history can serve as a point of reference in people's personal experience or familial memory to remind them of their ties to a community - imagined or otherwise.

If allusions to a shared history of peace and security with European neighbours since the Second World War failed to generate support for Remain in 2016, one must attempt to understand the ways in which Vote Leave enjoyed better success in mobilizing history as a weapon in the campaign. In light of their own self-conception as underdogs fighting a heroic battle against the British establishment, Brexiteers drew on simple, misleading historical analogies to present Britain as an underdog nation oppressed by evil Europeans. As Richard J. Evans has noted, these allusions were almost always "spurious". Boris Johnson may have convinced some by writing that Brussels' bureaucrats shared with Adolf Hitler the desire to bring "Europe under a single government [by] different methods," but in fact there is no evidence that either sought this (Evans 2018). Such images were repeated and bolstered in the pro-Brexit press, including in the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, the most aggressively pro-Brexit newspapers, which campaigned for leave from the beginning. 70% of the readers of the Sun supported Brexit, and were a fertile ground for promoting Vote Leave's arguments (Shipman 2017, 127). Alongside the language of Boris Johnson's column, other writers in the *Daily Telegraph* such as Simon Heffer, hyperbolised Germany's economic power to the point of calling it the "Fourth Reich". In an express appeal to whichever form of liberalism meant he could become the next prime minister, Johnson called for Britain to "liberate" itself from European domination as it had done in the Second World War (Evans 2018). In his 2018 *New*

Statesman piece, Evans did a remarkable job of exposing the lazy historical of which almost all the leading Brexiteers were guilty, emphasising in particular the erroneous claims around the need for "freedom" from Europe once again.

Nonetheless, the extent to which Vote Leave saw itself as the "underdog" should not be underestimated. Steve Baker, the Conservative MP and former Royal Air Force officer, who was the leader of the Eurosceptic group Conservatives for Britain and came to be a crucial link between the official Vote Leave campaign and parliament, famously wrote on the wall of the spartan campaign office "You're all heroes". There had no been Vote Leave launch event, because the campaign did not have the business, political, or celebrity endorsements for Remain, and instead launched with a video piloting the original slogan: "Vote Leave, let's take control" (Shipman 2017, 55). Of course, the Leave campaign was certainly the underdog when viewed alongside the Westminster government machine, which was mobilised to back Remain, and this narrative proved powerful at Cummings' campaign headquarters, and shaped the mindset of both strategists and politicians in the Leave campaign.

Furthermore, Vote Leave's underdog status against the establishment was arguably part of its appeal in the first place for the likes of Gove and Johnson. In their warlike admiration for Winston Churchill, for example, it seems that both men joined the campaign in the first place thinking they would go down as heroic underdogs, losing the referendum but perfectly placed to lead the Conservative Party as soon as they sensed further Cameronian weakness (admittedly according to sources close to David Cameron – see Shipman 2017, 154]. This is not to say that Gove and Johnson were not moved by principal in any way to back Brexit. Rather, that it is hard to see beyond naked political ambition of lieutenants looking to steal the leadership of the party and the country, whatever the cost. Admiration for Churchill, and the sense that they were walking in his footsteps, gave Brexiteers even greater confidence that they were leading a valiant fight against a future dictated to them by Germans and French.

It is, however, impossible to reconcile a perception of 'underdog' status, both in terms of Vote Leave's relative power vis a vis Britain Stronger in Europe, or in terms of Britain's status relative to a fictional European "super-state", with the narrative of imperial power so prominent in the Brexit referendum. To understand the role of imperial legacy in 2016, one must look once again at the 1975 experience. During the first referendum, imperial decline and the loss of colonies meant the European Economic Community represented the possibility for new beginning. The *Sun* reported in March 1975: "After years of drift and failure, the Common Market offers an unrepeatable opportunity for a nation that lost an empire to gain a continent." 1975 certainly represented a fork in the road for Britain when it came to its identity and is place in the world. The editors of a newly commissioned publication, the Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, published in article in their inaugural issue in 1972 stating that the Commonwealth was "a noble idea" that had already "failed". During the year when Parliament was considering the European Communities Act, such a debate about Britain's imperial role, and the status of its Commonwealth of former colonies, is noteworthy (Saunders 2018, 310). By contrast, in 2016, memories of the horrors of imperial rule and the humiliations of decolonisation all-but-forgotten, Brexiteers produced narratives of a return to British imperial greatness through post-Brexit trade deals with Commonwealth. Both Richard Evans and Kehinde Andrews have made reference to Brexiteer MP, and Secretary of State for International Trade, Dr. Liam Fox's tweet from March 2016 that Britain "is one of the few countries in the European Union that does not need to bury its 20th century history" (Andrews 2017). Such utterances make it clear that feelings of (racial) superiority are alive and well in sections of the British elites, which choose to bury the atrocities of British colonialism, such as the three million deaths caused by the Bengal famine or the use of concentration camps in the Boer War. The prospect for trade deals with former colonials is based not in a desire for mutually beneficial free trade, but on an arrogant assumption that previously subjugated nations would wish to trade with their former colonial master. Regardless of colonial legacies, 31 of the remaining 52 Commonwealth countries have populations of less than 1.2 million and do not pose any realistic opportunities for significant trade, and can certainly not replace the economic value of belonging to the world's largest trading bloc, the EU (Tomlinson and Dorling 2016). Those educated in Britain even as late as the 1960s grew up with maps on their classroom wall showing British control of huge parts of the globe. As Schwarz has argued, it is difficult to shake the sense of natural superiority which can come from knowing that your country once held a great empire, making people more susceptible to the myths of a renewed relationship with the Commonwealth after Brexit. Such calls for a return to global partnerships with former colonies sat effortlessly in pro-Brexit rhetoric alongside anti-immigrant slurs about the dangers of Turks coming to Europe, again raising clear questions about the consistency of Brexiteers' messages (Tomlinson and Dorling 2016; Andrews 2017).

It is worth noting, such is the symbolism of the underlying message behind the choice of a particular venue for prime ministers' speeches, that Theresa May outlined her plans for the details of Brexit at Lancaster House, the site of the conferences in the late 1950s and early 1960s where Nigeria and then Kenya's independence were negotiated. Whilst it may be too broad a conclusion to assert the parallels between the humiliation of decolonization and the diminution of Britain's standing in the world after Brexit simply on the basis of this connection, the history of Lancaster House's uses leads one reasonably to emphasise the inescapability of Britain's former empire as a backdrop for Brexit. As Sigmund Freud noted, "some impression" of colonial experience still looms over post-imperial society, and in many ways highlights the hypocrisy of attempts by politicians to claim that a 'liberal' Brexit based on a mutually beneficial trade relationship with formerly colonized Commonwealth nations, was somehow possible (Schwarz 2002).

At the party held at Vote Leave headquarters on the night of the referendum, Daniel Hannan, one of the Brexiteer historians, gave a speech celebrating victory. It was a version of the St. Crispian's feast speech from Shakespeare's Henry V, replacing the names of the king's noblemen with those of leading lights from the Vote Leave campaign. Shipman reports him as saying:

> From now on every year, it comes round, you guys will be remembered. Our names familiar in their mouths as household words - Duncan Smith and Penny Mordaunt and Dominic and Oliver and Douglas Carswell, and Parky and Starky [Parkinson and Stephenson, two Vote Leave communications aides] … What an amazing thing we have pulled off, and every year this will be our day, the day that we showed the world that this country was not yet finished. This is our Independence Day. (Shipman 2017, 437)

This event is illustrative of many of the conclusions that emerge from this analysis of Brexiteers' use of history, during the campaign and since. Whilst the speech does not allude to the desire for a return to the days of British global imperialism, Hannan's words make clear the Brexiteers' self-perception as underdog warriors, who succeeded in defeating the establishment against the odds and deserve a place in a Shakespearean history play. Moreover, the choice of Henry V emphasises the anti-European, in this case, anti-French sentiment underlying many of the historical illusions seen throughout British anti-Europe rhetoric. The success of Brexiteers' emotional historical claims was built on decades of allusions to the past in British political debates. It will therefore be unsurprising if we see even more nostalgic calls in future British political discourse for a return to a "better" past, after Britain formally leaves the EU later this year. Such is the Brexiteers' selective use of history, however, that Hannan omitted another more ominous part of the speech at the victory party:

> Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost; It yearns me not if men my garments wear; Such outward things dwell not in my desires. But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive.

Arguably, this latter part of the speech would have been more appropriate in light of the immense uncertainties unleashed by Britain's vote to leave the European Union. Brexiteers had been able to unite around historical, emotional claims during the campaign, but were, and continue to be, deeply divided about the options for Britain's economic future after Brexit. Having coveted "honour", they ignored warning signs from experts and institutions about the possibility for economic downturn, discord and lack of consensus after the vote. All they could agree on were the emotionally driven arguments and parallels to a fabled time in which Britain had control, and they mobilised their campaign around these messages. Yet given that a YouGov poll two days before the referendum showed that only 19% of voters trusted David Cameron's statements, this was enough to secure victory. Historians must therefore continue to interrogate politicians attempts to monopolise historical narratives, in order to fight the tides of false claims and national myths which are now so prevalent in public discourse. In doing so must continue to promote a message of reason in political discussion over visceral cries for an imagined past.

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[i] Winkler 2004, *Griff nach der Deutungsmacht*, 11: "In einer demokratischen Gesellschaft pflegen mehrere Geschichtsbilder miteinander zu konkurrieren".
[ii] Translation from German – author's own

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