

# BREXIT AND THE BATTLE FOR THE PAST

A study of historian's involvement in the Brexit debate

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## Abstrakt

23 juni 2016 stemte Britene nei til EU-medlemskap. I mange år hadde Storbritannia vært et vanskelig medlem av EU. For noen, spesielt på høyresiden av Britisk politikk hadde folkeavstemmingen om EU-medlemskap vært en lang drøm. Når Britene stemte den 23 Juni 2016 hadde de ett spørsmål de skulle svare på, ja eller nei til EU-medlemskap. Spørsmålet er ekstremt komplisert. Dermed åpent det for flere aktører i debatten. Alle hadde sine meninger og argumenter. Noen historikere spilte også en rolle i den debatten.

Denne oppgaven handler hovedsakelig om historikernes rolle i Brexit debatten. Fra 2013 begynte et knippe historikere å samle seg i forskjellige grupper og nettverk. *Historikere for Britain* var gruppen hvor euro skeptiske historikere samlet seg, og *Historikere for Britain i Europa* var gruppen hvor pro-Europeiske historikere samlet seg. Det var andre mindre grupper også, men det var de to som var størst og hadde mest media opptredener.

Hensikten med denne oppgaven er å se på hvilke grupper og nettverk av historikere som dukket opp i respons til Brexit debatten fra 2013 til 2016, samt hvilke aktiviteter og argumenter de fremmet. Jeg vil også se på om dette faktisk spilte noen rolle i debatten i det hele tatt. Ble historikerne tatt godt imot i debatten eller var det ingen som brydde seg? Oppgaven vil også se på om debatten fikk noen konsekvenser for politisk aktive historikere

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This thesis addresses very recent history. Consequently, the existing research literature is limited. This had made the generosity of historians such as Oliver Lewis and Paul Lay extra valuable. Oliver Lewis, has been highly supportive throughout this project, not only was he kind enough to meet me in London for an interview – he has also continuously shared insights, contacts and references. Similarly, I would also like to thank Paul Lay for meeting me for an interview and for offering his insights too – both have proven invaluable for this thesis. A number of other historians were also kind to respond to my emails and offer their thoughts and insights on this project: Abigail Green, David Abulafia, Robert Tombs and A.W. Purdue thank you.

I would also like to thank my family and friends who have kept me positive throughout, and provided me with a roof over my head when I was in London doing research. Finally, thanks to my late father who sparked my interest in history. His enthusiasm for history and politics rubbed off on me as a child. Unfortunately, he is no longer here to see me complete this project. But I am sure it's something he would have enjoyed reading and been proud of.

Paul Hemmer, September 2018

## Abbreviations

**ECSC** European Coal and Steel Community

**EDC** European Defence Community

**EEA** European Economic Area

**EEC** European Economic Community

**EFTA** European Free Trade Association

**EU** European Union

**MP** Member of Parliament (Common abbreviation for members elected to the House of Commons in London, United Kingdom).

**MEP** Member of the European Parliament (Common abbreviation for members elected to the European Parliament based in Brussels, Belgium).

**NATO** North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

**UK** United Kingdom

**UKIP** United Kingdom Independence Party (Anti-European Union populist political party).

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Brexit

“Brexit means Brexit and we’re going to make a good job of it.”<sup>1</sup> This is how Theresa May<sup>2</sup> opened her campaign speech to be Prime Minister, after the unexpected resignation of her predecessor David Cameron<sup>3</sup>. But what does Brexit actually mean? At the time of writing August 2018, over 2 years after the Brexit referendum, it is still unclear what Brexit actually means or what form it will take. Yes, Britain is leaving the European Union, however, is Britain going to stay in the Customs Union, the Single Market and stay subject to the European court of Justice jurisdiction? These items are just some of the many sticking points as to what form Brexit might take. Notable figures, such as, Tony Blair<sup>4</sup>, Sir Nick Clegg<sup>5</sup> Sir John Major<sup>6</sup> would like Brexit to be stopped completely and actively campaign for it. Such a complex debate on one of the most important issues in modern British history, didn’t just involve current and past politicians. Historians, were also actively involved in the debate

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<sup>1</sup> “‘Brexit means Brexit’, Theresa May lays out case for becoming PM.”

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1307374/Brexit-means-Brexit-Theresa-lays-case-PM.html>. (Retrieved, 29/04/2018).

<sup>2</sup> Theresa May, born 01/10/1956, Conservative Prime Minister of Great Britain, assumed office 13/07/2016. Please note that I have strived to offer personal data on all actors in this thesis, although most of them will be familiar figures, perhaps especially to readers of a master thesis on this topic. The reason I have done this is twofold. Firstly, there is a tendency memory serves us better the closer we are to the actual events. In my experience, that is not always so. Second, it is my hope that this thesis will have a long life, and I acknowledge that what might be perceived as obvious to us contemporaries might not be the case to those who follow after us.

<sup>3</sup> David Cameron, born 09/10/1966, Conservative Prime Minister of Great Britain from 11/05/2010 to 13/07/2016.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Blair, born 06/05/1953, Labour Prime Minister of Great Britain from 02/05/1997 until 27/06/2007, Labours longest serving Prime Minister and arguably one of the most pro-European premiers.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Nick Clegg, born 07/01/1967, former Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition with the Conservatives, an outspoken pro-European.

<sup>6</sup> Sir John Major, born 29/03/1943, former Conservative Prime Minister of Great Britain, took Britain towards a political union with Europe by signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

before and after the referendum. It is these historians, and the debate that went on between them that this thesis is mainly concerned with.

### 1.1.1 Introduction

Great Britain has often been described as an ‘awkward partner’<sup>7</sup> in the European Union. In some respects, this relationship can be seen to have become more awkward over time. ‘Euroscepticism’ is a label often applied by the British media to describe those who are critical to closer integration between Britain and Europe. The social scientists Ultan and Ornek offer the following broad definition of Euroscepticism, “critical practices that oppose European integration and contesting the European Union as a political entity”<sup>8</sup>. In this thesis, I will apply Ultan and Ornek’s definition, albeit not without some health warnings. First, it is important to be aware of the distinction between ‘Euroscepticism’ as a construct and a concept and the real-life phenomenon it sets out to describe. Second, although ‘Euroscepticism’ has mainly been applied to members of the Conservative Party since the 1990s, it is important to keep in mind that, the phenomena it sets out to describe can be found across a broad political spectrum. The European question has created a schism *within* as well as *between* parties. In more recent years, this has – amongst others – contributed to heavy intra-party fighting in the Conservative Party as well left-wing Labour politicians openly criticising the party line.

Euroscepticism in Britain is not a new phenomenon as such, but can be said to have increased and intensified after the Maastricht Treaty came into force in 1993. At the time of the signing of the Treaty, the Prime Minister John Major even went as far as calling three of his cabinet colleagues ‘bastards’, in a now famous outburst recorded on video tape when Major had thought he was not being filmed.<sup>9</sup> Eurosceptic Conservative Party MPs did not go away despite the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. They would go onto to be vocal and

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<sup>7</sup> Term coined by Stephen George in his book, *An Awkward Partner, Britain in the European Union*.

<sup>8</sup> Mehlika Ultan and Serdar Ornek, "Euroscepticism in the European Union," *International Journal of Social Sciences* IV, no. 2 (2015). p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Routledge and Simon Hoggart, "Major Hits out at Cabinet," *The Guardian* 25/07/1993.

troublesome. According to Daniel Hannan<sup>10</sup> the Conservative MEP and journalist, (one of the most vocal and influential campaigners in the run up to Brexit), this was a turning point as: “The Treaty added a political dimension to the existing market one. Along with this what had previously been the European Economic Community became the European Union”<sup>11</sup> Notably, Maastricht and the changes what came with it divided the public as well as politicians. The public, at times, became dismayed with how much they saw as the EU interfering with their lives. An example of this is, the attempt to introduce the metric system in place of the British imperial one, resulting in Sunderland market traders finding themselves in trouble for selling vegetables in pounds.<sup>12</sup> A Eurobarometer<sup>13</sup> survey in 2009 showed the British to be amongst the most sceptical to the EU.

In the 2010 general election, no party managed to win an outright majority. Most of the pollsters and experts had expected this to be the case in 2015 also. The Tories and the Liberal Democrats had spent the five previous years in an at what times has been described as a toxic coalition. In the 2015 General election, David Cameron feared losing votes to UKIP, particularly over the European issue. Perhaps it was this fear, and problems from long-standing Eurosceptics in his own party which led him to promise an EU referendum in the 2015 party manifesto. Historian and friend of Cameron Niall Ferguson<sup>14</sup> thinks this manifesto promise was, “indispensable to the election victory. If this promise had not been made than UKIP would have been much more of threat, and there would have being a revolt in the shires.”<sup>15</sup> Cameron even had the support of Europhile ministers in his party. Alistair

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Hannan, born 01/09/1971, Conservative member of the European Parliament for South East England, well-known and outspoken Eurosceptic.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Hannan, *What Next* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016). p.18.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (Strand, London, England: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2014). p.800.

<sup>13</sup> Public opinion surveys, conducted on the behalf on the European Commission.

<sup>14</sup> Niall Ferguson, born 18/04/1964, scholar of international history, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford.

<sup>15</sup> Niall Ferguson discussion with Will Self 25/02/2018, London.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQghUuH5n2M> (retrieved 20/03/2018).

Burt said, “he didn’t blame the Prime Minister for calling the referendum, ‘it was important not just for party management, but important for the country, that the people got the vote’.”<sup>16</sup>

The Brexit referendum, took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016. The result was close with 52 percent of voters preferring Britain to leave the European Union. Just over 17 million people voted leave this is larger than any winning political party has ever won in British elections. A heated debate between *The Remain campaign* and *The Leave campaign* raged in the run-up to the referendum. The debate is ongoing, often as to what form Brexit will take. Historians were also involved before the referendum and still are. Two notable groups of historians emerged before the referendum. *Historians for Britain* and *Academics for Britain in Europe*<sup>17</sup>. There were other groups, but it was these two which were the most significant in terms of media appearances and the research they published. This thesis will discuss both groups in detail, and present a history of historian’s involvement in the Brexit debate.

## 1.2 Research status – historians, Britain and the EU

The events this thesis will document and discuss are, as mentioned, relatively recent. Thus, there hasn’t been much research published on historian’s involvement in the Brexit debate. However, it is still possible to place phenomena studied here in a larger context as well as a research body. One alternative could have been to see the topic of this thesis as part of broader studies of academic as activists. In this analysis here, however, I have placed emphasis on the historical arguments of the actors. This makes identification of the main historiographical trends and positions of Britain’s relationship with Europe relevant.

The political scientist Oliver Daddow, has written extensively on the historiography of Britain and Europe since 1945, and has emerged as one of the authorities in the field<sup>18</sup>. Daddow

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Shipman, *All out War : The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class* (London: William Collins, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2016). p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Group was made up of a number of different professions, *Historians for Britain in Europe*, was the name the historians of the group gave themselves.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Daddow, scholar who specialises in British foreign policy and its world role as well as British European policy. Presented a number of historiographical perspectives on British and European integration in his book *Britain and Europe since 1945*, published in 2004. In an article written in

has classified academic research and literature on Britain's relationship with Europe into three different schools. He has classified early literature as 'orthodox', highlighting how earlier historians argued Britain 'missed opportunities' at European integration. His second school is revisionist, where he identifies later historians going against the conventional wisdom of Britain having 'missed opportunities', often after studying newly released documents from the National Archives. The third school is post-revisionist, where Daddow argues that there has been a form of a revision of revisionism since the 1990s. As with the revisionist school of historians, post-revisionists have relied heavily on the National Archives for source material. However, Daddow argues:

they have organised their research in a different way, post-revisionists inject chaos and uncertainty into their narratives. They show British foreign policy to be more chaotic and disorderly than both the orthodox and revisionist historians.<sup>19</sup>

As Daddow's research shows, Britain and Europe since 1945 is a very much debated subject. It comes as no surprise, that this very debated area of history was very much discussed by historians as part of the Brexit debate. Previous research such as Daddow's, shows that historiography of Britain's relationship with Europe has changed markedly over time.

Even though it is recent history, a number of books have already been published on the story of Brexit. For instance, political journalist Tim Shipman has used his vast list of political contacts to help him write his book *All-out War, The full story of Brexit*. One reviewer complimented Shipman's work by stating, "there seems to be no one whom he hasn't spoken and whose motives he does not pretty accurately portray and understand."<sup>20</sup> Shipman's actors were politicians, they were also his sources. My sources and actors, on

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2006, *Euroscepticism and the Culture of the Discipline of History*, Daddow identifies the long strands of Eurosceptic opinion in English historiography. As well as pointing out the difficulties in debunking Eurosceptic opinion as it is so ingrained in English historiography. Both pieces have proven a valuable guide to this thesis, as well as some of the other articles Daddow has wrote.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver J. Daddow, *Britain and Europe since 1945 : Historiographic Perspectives on Intergration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). p.157.

<sup>20</sup> Will Hutton, "All out War; the Brexit Club; the Bad Boys of Brexit Review – Rollicking Referendum Recollections," *The Guardian*, 21/11/2016.

the other hand, will be historians. Historians in the Brexit debate is, to the best of my knowledge something which hasn't had very much written about it. Shipman's book seems to be the standard text on the story of Brexit as I write in August 2018, however, he makes no mention of any of the groups of historians which will be at the heart of this study.

### 1.3 Theme, actors and research questions

British historians have a long tradition of involvement in political debate. Take, for instance, the Marxist historians E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Both were members of The Communist Party of Great Britain, and played an active role in left-wing politics throughout their lives. In this thesis, I study two constellations of historians that both set their marks on the Brexit debate: *Historians for Britain* and *Historians for Britain in Europe*. In the Brexit debate, it was *Historians for Britain* whom appeared to have got involved first. Their first appearance in the national press was via a letter to the *Times* in July 2013. Looking at their name, it would hardly come as a surprise that *Historians for Britain* proposed a Eurosceptic view on both the past and the present. They were soon followed by *Historians for Britain in Europe*, which can be seen as a counterpart to *Historians for Britain*. Both parties were active in the public debate and both parties had fully operational websites in the run-up to the referendum and immediately after.<sup>21</sup>

Historians involvement in the Brexit debate is worthy of further study. The article *Rival historians trade blows over Brexit*, written by the influential and award-winning journalist Gideon Rachman, was published in the *Financial Times* just before the referendum.<sup>22</sup> Here Rachman, himself a historian by training, emphasised how the debate between historians began quite politely, but escalated in terms of arguments as well as temperature. This thesis will address the entire process by investigating further the roles historians played before and after the referendum.

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<sup>21</sup> Thankfully, I saved some of the research they published before the websites were taken down. It is worth noting that the original web address for *Historians for Britain* is now in use again. However, whoever is using it has nothing to do with the group I will discuss in this thesis. This is very clear when one takes a look through the content there. I have attempted to contact whoever runs the website now but I have received no response.

<sup>22</sup> The *Financial Times*, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.



The two principal research questions addressed in this master thesis are:

- What activities and arguments did *Historians for Britain* and *Historians for Britain in Europe* promote?
- How and why did the involvement of historians effect the Brexit debate as well as communities of British historians involved in it?

In addition, several sub-questions will be addressed such as for instance - did historians getting involved in politics come at a price? What effect – if any – did the involvement of historians have on the Brexit debate? Did historians bring something others didn't, for example? After all, what is stopping others using the past for political purposes?

## 1.4 Sources

In order to answer questions, I like other historians – depend on my sources. In this section, I will outline the different types of sources which could be utilised in this thesis. I will discuss in turn the possibilities for each type of source as well as their limitations.

Firstly, on source work in general I will follow some of the points E.H. Carr<sup>23</sup> made in his critically acclaimed book *What is History*. Although, it is now over fifty years since Carr published this work some of his points still have relevance today. Carr's work was criticised by some of his peers at the time. For instance, G.R. Elton<sup>24</sup> called into question some of Carr's arguments which I will go into in the following paragraph.

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Carr, 28/06/1892 – 03/11/1982, English historian, author of *What is history?* first published in 1961, in this book Carr lays out a number of historiographical principles which at the time went against historical practice and methods, the book is still widely studied today.

<sup>24</sup> G.R. Elton, 17/08/1921 – 04/12/1991, German-born British political historian, Regius Professor of Modern history 1983 - 1988.

How should one approach working with sources relevant to this very politicised area of history? Firstly, it is worth bearing in mind one of Carr's famous quotes. "Study the historian before you begin to study the facts"<sup>25</sup> Historians serve as both actors and sources in this project, therefore, it is of importance that I study them, particularly in such a politicised area. I have done this by looking over their previous publications, looking to see if they are affiliated to a university, if so which, do they have any political affiliations? In particular for this thesis, did the historian I am writing about have an affiliation with any of the groups I have introduced in this chapter. Today, historians may be hesitant to use the word facts. I can change Carr's quote slightly to, "study the historian before you begin to study their research."<sup>26</sup> Nowadays facts are often disputed no matter how distinguished the researcher.

Carr argued that facts of the past did not become facts of history until it comes up in one or two historical accounts. Thus, placing the emphasis on the historian's interpretation of the facts. Elton argued that, "this was an arrogant attitude to both the past and to the place of the historian studying it."<sup>27</sup> Disagreements between distinguished historians aren't anything new as these quotes show. Historians in the Brexit debate, at times, publically disagreed with what Carr would call historical facts. Another of Carr's arguments was on the idea of history being used to better understand the future. Richard Evans<sup>28</sup> has called this usage of history into question, "historians are no more capable of imagining or predicting the future than anyone else."<sup>29</sup> According to Evans's argument, it is worth proceeding with a degree of caution when history is discussed with an eye on what might happen in the future. In the Brexit debate, actors from various professions offered their views and arguments on how they seen Britain's future, inside or outside the EU. In such a debate historians can also play

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Hallett Carr and Richard J. Evans, *What Is History?*, 2nd ed., repr. with new introd. ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). p.17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.17.

<sup>27</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, London,; Sydney U.P.; Methuen, 1967). p.75-76.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Evans, born 29/09/1947, British historian of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Regius Professor of history until his retirement in 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997). p.229.

a role, however, as Evans argues they aren't any better than anyone else at predicting what might happen. What the future will hold for Britain outside the EU remains very much to be seen.

### 1.4.1 Interviews

In hierarchical terms, interviews will be at the top of the sources in this master project. The interviews add a dimension to the analysis that goes beyond the scope of the written sources. Interviews are sources that otherwise would not have existed. Thus, working with oral sources also enlarges the scope of a history project such as this by not only describing and analysing actors and events, but *documenting* it too.

How should one then approach using interviews as potential oral sources in a project such as this? According to John Tosh<sup>30</sup>, one should approach them as any other source "with historian's traditional critical analysis skills."<sup>31</sup> "Interviewees may indeed want to get 'their' version of events on record"<sup>32</sup>. Whilst, this is all well and good for me, as it is after all 'their' version of events I am looking for. It is still very important to follow what John Tosh says on the use of oral sources. As I have stated they are at the top of the hierarchy, but this doesn't mean they are approached any differently. Critical analysis skills and keeping a distance from the interviewee is necessary, especially in such a polarised area of history.

I have been able to interview two key players in the historical side of the Brexit debate. My first interviewee, was Paul Lay<sup>33</sup>. Lay is the editor of *History Today* a monthly UK based history magazine. Lay's position as editor has put him in a particularly interesting place as a close-up understanding of both debates – and at times lack of it between historians. I have

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<sup>30</sup> John Tosh, British historian, well-known for his work as historiographer.

<sup>31</sup> John Tosh and Seán Lang, *The Pursuit of History : Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 4th ed. ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006). p.334.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.335.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Lay, editor of *History Today* Magazine where a number of exchanges between historian's pre-referendum took place.

also interviewed Oliver Lewis<sup>34</sup>. Lewis was with *Historians for Britain* from the start and wrote some of the research they published on their website. Lewis, was able to provide me with some very interesting insights on *Historians for Britain* as well as the historical side of the Brexit debate.

My interviewees have provided me with the most important sources for this thesis. I have been able to see differing insider's perspectives on the debate, which have proven invaluable. In short, I don't think I could have found what they told me anywhere else at the time being. In practical terms, the face to face interviews have also taken the most effort on my part. I have travelled from Norway to London twice, as well as taken time to write the interview guides and digest what I got from the interviews.

For a number of practical reasons, it was necessary to use email correspondence in this project. As most of the historians hoped to interview are based in the UK, it hasn't always been possible for me to arrange to interview them. Even when this has been possible from my side these historians are busy academics and haven't always had time to accommodate me. While these historians also act as interviewees, it is important to note I did not meet them face to face. Therefore, I haven't gained as much from them as I have from interviews with Paul Lay and Oliver Lewis. Meeting people face to face allowed for a much more open discussion, what I gained from these two meetings has proven invaluable for this thesis.

#### 1.4.2 Blogs

Some other important source material I will use in this project, is the research which was published by the historical actors in the run-up to the referendum. Often this was published in blog form on their respective websites.

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<sup>34</sup> Oliver Lewis, former research director at *Business for Britain*, had the original idea for a group such as *Historians for Britain*.

These blogs show how historians used their knowledge of the past to contribute to the Brexit debate. Some used their knowledge of history to present a sceptical view of Britain's relationship with Europe while others made a pro-European case. I have used these blogs to present an analysis of historian's response to the debate, and to detail what activities and arguments they promoted. I won't be taking sides, I will be using blogs as source material for discussion. How should I approach source work with blogs? I think it is worth looking at some of Ludmilla Jordanova<sup>35</sup> points here. An important point from Jordanova to bear in mind is, "the dramas of politics shape historical practice."<sup>36</sup> Brexit is a great political drama. As well as its dramas shaping historical practice, historians also attempted to shape political drama via the use of their expertise. History also has opportunities in such drama:

public history has huge potential to make fundamental contribution to politics and policies, however, the costs of ignorance of the belief systems and past histories are potentially huge too.<sup>37</sup>

Here the historical response to the Brexit debate is a good example of the potential public history has. I think the points I have raised here from Jordanova's book *History in Practice*, are worth having in mind for working with the blogs published in the run-up to the Brexit referendum.

### 1.4.3 Newspapers and magazines

Newspapers have a threefold value to the historian:

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<sup>35</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, born 10/10/1949, British historian, has written broadly on the nature of the subject of history, her book *History in Practice* is widely studied.

<sup>36</sup> L. J. Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006). p.173.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.173.

they record political and social views which made an impact at the time, they provide a day-to-day record of events and lastly, they present results of more thorough enquires into issues beyond the scope of routine news reporting.<sup>38</sup>

It is for these reasons that I will also use newspapers in this master's project. While I have outlined a number of strengths newspapers have it is equally important to be aware of their weaknesses. One must be aware of the bias found in British newspapers. In particular, on the issue of Brexit, some newspapers wanted Britain to remain, for instance, the *Guardian*. On the other hand, others preferred Britain to leave the EU, for example, the *Daily Mail* and the *Express*. It is important to be aware of the political stance of any newspaper which is used in a historical project.

Some of the main exchanges between historians during the Brexit debate took place in a monthly history magazine *History Today*. The magazine caters for history enthusiasts. From ancient to contemporary history, *History Today* attempts to entertain and inform those who are interested in the past. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that it was such a magazine where exchanges took place. After all, the historians who involved themselves in the Brexit debate are more likely to well received in a history magazine than in a national daily newspaper with a much wider audience. Other magazines, such as, the *Economist* are also useful here. The *Economist* is published weekly and caters for those with a particular interest in current affairs.

## 1.5 Sources and literature as a unified universe

I have now outlined the different types of sources and literature I will use to help me to present answers to my research questions. I have also discussed the reasons why they are useful for this master thesis. While the interviews I will conduct are at the top of the hierarchy, it is important for me to use all the sources and literature together as a unified universe. This quote from John Tosh illustrates the importance of using them together; "Each type of source possesses certain strengths and weaknesses; considered together, and compared one against the other, there is at least a chance that they will reveal

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<sup>38</sup> Tosh and Lang. (2006): p.66-67.

something very close to the truth.”<sup>39</sup> It is in this light I will work with my sources throughout this thesis.

## 1.6 Approach

As previously mentioned, the work on this thesis has involved, *locating* as well as *generating* sources. As British historian Peter Burke has pointed out, “when asking new kinds of questions about the past, for these new objects of research I will have to look for new kinds of sources.”<sup>40</sup> The interviews with historians who are also actors in this project, are examples of such new sources.

These sources have truly enriched this project. Yet, oral sources like any other source should be treated with a critical eye. In this project, they offer the important insider perspective of events. Me being the interviewer as well as the historian has some steps which should be followed whilst using interviews as oral sources. “Historians must accept responsibility for their share in creating new evidence.”<sup>41</sup> In my own case, submitting this project in Norway I have informed the Norwegian data authorities of this project. My interviewees have also given me their consent to use the interviews in this project. Finally, it is up to me to zoom out from interviewees arguments and points. This approach will enable me to present a scholarly account of historian’s involvement in the Brexit referendum.

These primary sources aren’t enough on their own to write this thesis. “They must be used alongside secondary material and have bearing on my research questions.”<sup>42</sup> Chapter 2, will be exclusively written with the aid of literature and secondary sources. In this chapter, political memoirs can provide valuable first-hand accounts of events. There are some

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. (2006): p.103.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). p.12.

<sup>41</sup> Tosh and Lang. (2006): p. 318.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History*, 3rd ed. ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). p.213.

common pitfalls to bear in mind while using political memoirs to reconstruct events. The obvious being that a politician may be very keen to present a more favourable view of themselves. This is hardly something new or unique for British politicians. In 2004, Daddow argued that something that was special to the topic of Britain and Europe in such memoirs is how “the history of Britain’s European policy is often treated as a side in such works. The second issue is that British politicians have neither the time nor interest, to devote much attention to Europe.”<sup>43</sup> I think the latter may have changed in recent years.

The analysis offered in chapter 3-5 are based on both sources and relevant literature. The literature I have used is relevant in the respect it has helped me and I hope the reader to better understand the source material I deploy. Still some principal comments are required. My understanding of ‘primary sources’ is broad and eclectic and stretches from face-to-face interviews, emails to printed texts. It is my hope that this pluralism will help, “generate more powerful insights, than if I had only used one type of source.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the historian Richard Evans underscores the importance of reflecting, “derive principally from present day concerns and from questions present day theories and ideas lead me to formulate.”<sup>45</sup> In short, the polarised situation of Brexit is important to have in mind whilst working with this thesis. This polarisation can be seen in various newspaper and magazine articles, as well as the blogs and articles some of the historians wrote.

## 1.7 Britain, England and all that – some terminology

At times in this thesis I will refer to British history as well as English history. This may seem a little complex but there are some reasons for doing this. *Historians for Britain*, despite the name mainly discuss English history. For instance, the idea of Common Law is actually English. However, if one is writing a history of England it is difficult to do so without discussing, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland as well as England. My intention is to try and present the best analysis of historian’s responses to the Brexit debate. Where I think this is

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<sup>43</sup> Daddow. p.105.

<sup>44</sup> Jordanova. (2006): p.95.

<sup>45</sup> Evans. (1997): p.84.



best served by saying British history I will do this, where I think it best by saying English history I will do so.

## 1.8 Thesis structure

The chapters in this thesis are principally set out in chronological order. In chapter 2, I will discuss Britain's relationship with Europe post 1945. While I won't answer my research questions directly in this chapter. It is important to have some historical context, so that the reader can better understand the later empirical chapters. I have chosen to include events which I think will help the reader to better understand the later chapters.

Chapter 3 will begin with the letter twenty-two historians signed in the *Times* newspaper published in July 2013. The letters title is *Time for 'a better deal' with the EU*. This letter marks the beginning of historian's involvement in the Brexit debate. I will look at how other historians responded to this letter, and how the debate began to take place between historians.

In chapter 4, I will continue to discuss the debate between historians. This took place via a number of platforms. In this particular chapter, I will discuss historians debating each other on TV and radio. As well as how some of the British media outlets responded to historian's involvement in the Brexit debate.

Chapter 5 will analyse the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, particularly the aftermath concerning historians. I will discuss what happened to some of the groups of historians I discussed in previous chapters. The Brexit debate didn't stop after the referendum. It is ongoing mainly as to what form Brexit ought to take. Some historians are active in this debate, I will analyse some of their arguments in this chapter.

Finally, in chapter 6 I will offer some concluding remarks.



## Chapter 2: Britain's relationship with Europe post 1945

From its attitudes to sex and marriage to its literature and its coinage, its food and the shape of its cities, Britain had chosen different solutions from those favoured across the Channel and beyond the Rhine, ones which were more individual and self-reliant, which depended more upon individual conscience and liberty, and less upon imposed authority.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

The following chapter will discuss Britain's relationship with Europe after 1945. Although this thesis will mainly address very recent history namely historians in the Brexit debate, previous historical events are quintessential to this debate, especially the developments after 1945.

Although, Britain finished the war on the winning side, this victory did not come without a heavy price for both Britain and her society. What was certain afterwards was: that Britain was no longer a superpower, it was the United States and the USSR whom emerged as the two world superpowers. According to historian Tony Judt<sup>47</sup> the Europe which emerged after the war was: "was a Europe of nation states more ethnically homogenous than ever before."<sup>48</sup> How would Britain find its way in Europe after the war? This chapter will look at how Britain attempted to find its way in Europe, at home and on the global stage at a time when it became clear that a new world order was in the making.

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain : From Winston Churchill to Princess Diana*, 1st U.S. ed. (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000). p.313-314.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Judt, 02/01/1948 – 06/08/2010, English-American historian who specialised in modern European history.

<sup>48</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar : A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005). (2005): p.27.

## 2.2 Missed opportunities?

In 1950, the French foreign minister Robert Schuman announced a plan for France and Germany to pool coal and steel production and invited other states to join them. Schuman hoped that such co-operation would make war between France and Germany impossible. “The British were invited to participate, but declined.”<sup>49</sup> What were the reasons for the lack of participation by the British? One could argue that, it would have made sense for a Britain in decline to have some sort of economic alliance with her European neighbours. Moreover, a more integrated Europe would likely be one where the horrors of The Two World wars wouldn't be repeated. It was no accident that the two things to be pooled were coal and steel. By doing this the chance of future wars between France and Germany would be reduced significantly.

Early historians of European integration argued that Britain had missed ‘opportunities’, ‘boats’ and ‘buses’. According to the political scientist Stephen George, “in its early days, the European Community took on a shape that suited the original six members far better than it suited Britain.”<sup>50</sup> So why did Britain choose not to join her closet neighbours in the early days of European integration? There were a number of reasons for the British not taking part in 1950. British labour politician Herbert Morrison famously said, “we cannot do it, the Durham miners won't wear it’. This statement shows Labour's fears of surrendering one of their key national industries to European control.”<sup>51</sup> This quotation is a timely one. The newly nationalised mines were a very powerful industry in 1950s Britain. Furthermore, a socialist Labour government wouldn't want to upset a heavily unionised workforce by giving the Europeans some controls over the industry. Great Britain, no longer has any active coal mines, however, the issue of British sovereignty never went away. It was one of the main

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner : Britain in the European Community*, 2nd ed., [rev. and expanded]. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). p.5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

<sup>51</sup> John W. Young, *Britain and European Unity, 1945-1999*, 2nd ed. ed., *British History in Perspective* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). p.31.

arguments made by the leave side in the Brexit referendum, that Britain ought to take back control over its own affairs.

The European Coal and Steel Community ECSC was established after the signing of the Treaty of Paris by the six<sup>52</sup> in April 1951. Historians of European integration Gowland and others argue that, “Britain was a notable absentee. The supranational dimension of the plan was ultimately the formal major obstacle to British membership.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the British Labour government had just nationalised the coal mines. The desire wasn’t there to pool control of them with the Europeans when nationalisation had just been completed. In 1950, The Korean War began this turned Britain’s attention away from Europe. This early chance of European integration was passed up by Britain, it is still debated as to whether this was an ‘opportunity missed’, or not.

Another frequently deployed argument in the Brexit debate was on the notion that European Union has kept peace in Europe, Eurosceptics have argued that this isn’t the case. Europe has experienced bloody wars spanning back centuries. Although the continent has still seen wars since the formation of the EEC, they haven’t been anywhere near the scale of the Two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There have been a number of attempts to form a common European defence policy and even a European army. The British, as with other previous attempts at European integration met this effort too with reluctance.

The idea of military union in Europe was put onto the agenda around the time of the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula in 1950. The Americans, worried about the spread of communism wanted a common European defence policy. This also appealed to French visionary Jean Monnet. The crisis in Korea created the perfect conditions for him to try and gather support for military union. This was no easy task, the main issue being the re-arming of West Germany. It was initially US Sectary of State Acheson who made the proposal to the British and the French. His reasons for this were: the weakness of NATO defences and the US not wanting to bear the burden of Western defence alone. With West Germany now seen

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<sup>52</sup> The six nations who signed the treaty were: Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, The Netherlands and Luxembourg.

<sup>53</sup> David Gowland, Arthur Turner, and Alex Wright, *Britain and European Integration since 1945 : On the Sidelines* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2010). p.26.

as a loyal ally this seemed like a natural step. “British foreign secretary Bevin was in favour of the idea. However, the French were not, their fear of Germany was still evident.”<sup>54</sup>

Monnet went to his political ally the then Prime Minister of France René Pleven for help, the result was the ‘Pleven Plan’ which Monnet himself actually drew up. “The plan would allow German rearmament – without giving the Germans any military independence.”<sup>55</sup> The British having already rejected any involvement in the ECSC would not favour this attempt at European integration. Ultimately, Monnet’s vision failed to materialise, it wasn’t ratified in the French national assembly. The issue of European defence remained a sticky one, with various future attempts at a common European defence policy not getting very far.

The six members of the ECSC signed the treaty of Rome in 1957, this set up the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). Once again, the British didn’t join her European neighbours. This was in spite of fears of any form of economic integration without the UK could potentially lead to German hegemony over Europe. Whilst, a major step towards European integration, “The Rome Treaty represented for the most part a declaration of future good intentions.”<sup>56</sup> The EEC’s aim was to create a common market and a customs union to allow easier trade between members, as well as free movement of capital and labour. The goal of Euratom was the joint development of nuclear energy.

Why once again had the British backed out of closer co-operation with her European neighbours? Academics offer differing opinions on this. For example, British academic Andrew Gamble argues that, “Britain wished to continue with her global responsibilities, as well as maintaining both leadership of Europe of The Commonwealth.”<sup>57</sup> Historian Tony Judt had a slightly different take as to the reasons for Britain not signing the treaty; stressing the weaknesses and divisions in Europe Judt argues, “ the British did not yet understand their

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<sup>54</sup> Young. (2000): p.33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.33.

<sup>56</sup> Judt. (2005): p.303.

<sup>57</sup> David Baker and David Seawright, *Britain for and against Europe : British Politics and the Question of European Integration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). p.14.

situation, therefore, they declined to join the EEC.”<sup>58</sup> The debate amongst historians and academics to the reasons for Britain backing away from European integration, on this occasion and others, has raged for many years.

## 2.3 A change of stance? British applications to join the EEC

Great Britain made two attempts to join the EEC, or what many at the time referred to as The Common Market before eventually joining in 1973. The Common Market was the free trading area amongst other EEC members. The first application to join was made between 1961-63 and the second in 1967. I will now discuss these applications, and some of the reasons historians give as to why Britain didn't join the EEC on these occasions.

It was Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who attempted to first take Britain into the Common Market. The Conservative Party is now known for hosting some of the most Eurosceptic factions in British politics, it is interesting that it was Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath<sup>59</sup> who first took Britain into EEC. 43 years later David Cameron another Conservative Prime Minister called the Brexit referendum, the result of which will lead to Britain leaving the EU. These are three major events in the history of British and European integration. All three events are very different but one thing is common, they all happened under Conservative Prime Ministers.

One should first turn to the creation of the European Free Trade Association, in 1960, if one is to understand the reasons for the British applications to join the EEC. Britain and seven<sup>60</sup> other nations set up EFTA. Like the EEC, the idea was to establish free trade between members. Two notable differences were: the opposition to external tariffs and not seeing the need for supranational institutions. Why would Britain apply to join the EEC so soon after the creation of EFTA? There are a number of possible reasons here in economic terms, “EFTA

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<sup>58</sup> Judt. (2005): p.303.

<sup>59</sup> Sir Edward Heath, 09/07/1916 - 17/07/2005, Conservative Prime Minister from 1970 – 1974.

<sup>60</sup> The Seven nations were: Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

was much smaller than the EEC and it brought few economic benefits to Britain.”<sup>61</sup> John Young also argues that; “Macmillan backed the EFTA arrangement. It was the belief at the time, that the EEC would be more willing to talk to successful trading bloc.”<sup>62</sup>

Europe was now split into two different trading blocs. What was clear from the EFTA arrangements, was that Britain preferred free trading agreements without political commitments or economic integration. With this setting how would the British desire to join the EEC be met? The Americans were keen for Britain to join the EEC they disliked EFTA. Washington valued the EEC, “as a barrier against Communism.”<sup>63</sup> Dean Acheson President Kennedys special advisor at the time of the application had said that, ““Britain has lost an empire but was yet to find a role””.<sup>64</sup> Acheson went further on the application calling it a, ““decisive turning point””.<sup>65</sup> However, American intervention didn’t help Britain on this occasion.

The French provided the most opposition to the British application. British historian Robert Tombs<sup>66</sup> argues that, “Charles de Gaulle the Prime Minister of France wanted to make France the leader of Europe.”<sup>67</sup> De Gaulle vetoed Macmillan’s application in 1963, on the grounds that:

England is an Island, sea-going, bound up by its trade, its markets, its food supplies, with the most varied and often the most distant countries. This would disrupt what he called a truly European Europe.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Young. (2000): p.63.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p.62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.63.

<sup>64</sup> Dean Acheson, "Britain’s Role in the World " *The Guardian* 06/12/1962.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Tombs, born 08/05/1949, British historian, Professor Emeritus of French History at the University of Cambridge, former *Historians for Britain* supporter, one the editors of *Briefings for Brexit* a Eurosceptic digital think-tank.

<sup>67</sup> Tombs. (2014): p.798.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.798.



Macmillan would eventually resign his position on health grounds later in 1963. He had been humiliated by the De Gaulle veto. The EEC had begun to take shape without Britain. The general consensus from historians was that Britain had missed a number of opportunities to shape Europe in the post-war years. However, some have questioned this particularly from 1990s onwards. The availability of documents released in the National Archives after 30 years has provided historians with an array of source material. By using these sources, historians have questioned the conventional wisdom that Britain 'missed opportunities' in the early days of the European Community.

Labour under Harold Wilson<sup>69</sup> came to power in 1964. Despite the good publicity and favourable public opinion Wilson got, this was far from a landslide victory and things wouldn't be easy for Labour from the onset. How would this new minority government with a popular leader fare in Europe? British historian Martin Pugh argues Wilson, "wanted to modernise British Society. Yet his external affairs policies, especially towards the USA and defence, proved Conservative and traditional."<sup>70</sup>

As the 1960s drew on, it became clear that economic and political pressures forced the Labour government to revise its external policies. Britain's economy was in decline, "whilst EEC continued to develop and show stronger growth."<sup>71</sup> The special relationship with the USA was rather different than what one might be used to today. Wilson gave his support for the USA's war in Vietnam, however, this wasn't backed with troops. Something markedly different from the future Labour governments of Tony Blair. Labours cabinet was growing old which meant Wilson had to change things round. Notable promotions were the pro-European Roy Jenkins to Chancellor and the left winger Tony Benn to cabinet. The

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<sup>69</sup> Harold Wilson, 11/03/1916 – 24/05/1995, Labour Prime Minister between, 1964 – 1970 and 1974 – 1976, attempted to renegotiate terms with the EEC and gave the British people their first say on membership in 1975.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Pugh, *State and Society : A Social and Political History of Britain since 1870*, 3rd ed. (London: Hodder Education, 2008). p.321.

<sup>71</sup> Young. (2000): p.83.

Conservative journalist Peter Hitchens<sup>72</sup> describes Jenkins as, “As the Europhile of Europhiles, he done more to push Britain towards European integration than even Edward Heath.”<sup>73</sup> It was Jenkins who was convinced that Britain’s future lay in Europe. This also meant giving up Britain’s old imperial role, something his older colleagues still held dear.

Wilson’s position on Europe was more difficult to pin-point. He was known for saying one thing to pro-Europeans and something else to Eurosceptics. Wilson announced in 1966 that there would be another application to join the EEC. In 1967, Britain made her second bid to join the EEC. “As with previous applications De Gaulle saw the application more as a matter of expediency than conviction, and vetoed it in November 1967.”<sup>74</sup> Historians have debated this matter ever since. This second rejection added weight to the ‘missed opportunities’ argument. Once again, for those that thought Britain should have taken a leading role in Europe earlier, Britain had come to the table far too late.

## 2.4 A new Era? EEC entry, Renegotiation and Britain’s first referendum on membership

The 1970s were a turbulent decade in Great Britain as elsewhere: industrial unrest, large strikes, high inflation, football hooliganism and a struggling economy were just some of the problems Britain faced. It was also the decade which saw Britain join some of her European neighbours in an economic union the EEC. It was a Conservative government under Edward Heath, arguably Britain’s most pro-European Prime Minister who took Britain into the EEC. It was a Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who attempted to renegotiate the terms of British EEC membership and gave the British people their first say on membership.

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Hitchens, born 28/10/1951, British journalist and author, long-term Eurosceptic, although he declined to vote in the referendum as his view was the referendum went against the British constitution and feared the fallout such a referendum may cause.

<sup>73</sup> Hitchens.(2000): p.267.

<sup>74</sup> Pugh. (2008): p.322.

### 2.4.1 EEC entry

According to John Young “it was clear that Heath would press for EEC membership more than Wilson.”<sup>75</sup> Why was this the case? There a number of reasons here, importantly the Conservative Party was much less divided over Europe than the Labour Party. This is a situation which would be reversed in the 1990s with the Conservative Party becoming the most Eurosceptic of the two main parties. Personally, Heath thought “that EEC entry would force British industry to become more competitive thus would hopefully transform the country’s future.”<sup>76</sup> Heath carefully choose his new cabinet to contain supporters of EEC entry.

The conditions for Heath to negotiate entry were also better than they had been under previous attempts. The position of Sterling and the trade balance had improved. Perhaps it was this what led to a softening of attitudes amongst the British political parties to EEC entry. The six members of the EEC were also more open to talks on wider membership. Heath, had previously been the British negotiator in 1961-2 this argues Pugh “gave him a clear grasp of the difficulties, especially the weakness of Britain’s position.”<sup>77</sup> So unlike previous Prime Ministers, Heath was prepared to accept the EEC as it was. He wouldn’t argue for a special deal or better terms for Britain.

Heath was able to win over the French whom had previously blocked British efforts for EEC entry. The bill (to allow Britain to join) which had to pass through parliament was very detailed, therefore, it wasn’t until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1973 that Britain officially became a member of the EEC. Sadly, for Heath his premiership wouldn’t last very long after this. The government which he led was brought down by an economic crisis, and the mobilisation of the trade unions against his government. Labour under Harold Wilson, came to power in 1974, and with it came more drama in Britain’s relationship with the EEC. Wilson, would also inherit the domestic problems which brought down Heath, in addition to this his own party was deeply divided over the European issue.

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<sup>75</sup> Young. (2000): p.100.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.100.

<sup>77</sup> Pugh. (2008): p.323.

## 2.4.2 Wilson's Renegotiations

The EEC or The Common Market<sup>78</sup> membership had a major effect on the 1974 election. Enoch Powell the right-wing Conservative firebrand recommended that, "Conservative opponents of the EEC should vote Labour."<sup>79</sup> Wilson played into this and fear over higher food prices. Labours election manifesto promised:

to renegotiate the terms of entry, reduce Britain's financial contribution and secure better terms for Commonwealth countries; it also promised a popular vote on membership, with the implication that Britain might withdraw.<sup>80</sup>

Labour, having won the election had to follow through on some of these promises or at least attempt to.

Wilson began formal renegotiations in June 1974. "The cabinet decided not to seek changes to the existing EEC treaties, this limited what the British could actually get."<sup>81</sup> 40 years later, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron would find it difficult to negotiate a better deal with the EU the successor of the EEC for Britain. Cameron too had called referendum and went to the EU to try and get 'a better deal' for Britain. They are parallels which can be drawn with Wilson's renegotiations and Cameron's some years later. Cameron too, was desperate to maintain party unity, the European issue had blighted the Conservative party for years. What is clear from both renegotiation efforts is: despite been from two different political parties, and been two very different Prime Ministers some years apart, it is no easy task for a British Prime Minister to get 'a better deal' from Europe.

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<sup>78</sup> Term commonly used at the time of Wilson's renegotiations.

<sup>79</sup> Young.(2000): p.112.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p.112.

<sup>81</sup> Gowland, Turner, and Wright. (2010): p.81.

Did Wilson actually achieve anything in these renegotiations which he could present to the British people? Comparatively little is the general consensus amongst historians. Items which featured most prominently on the agenda were:

the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy CAP, a reduction in the UK's contribution to the community budget and an extension of guaranteed EEC market access to Caribbean sugar producers and New Zealand farmers.<sup>82</sup>

It was these items I have discussed here which Wilson presented to the British people. According to George he presented them to the British press as, "an unequivocal acceptance of the British demands, a capitulation of the foreign dragons to the courage of the British champion."<sup>83</sup> However, Gowland and others paint a different picture, "domestic opinion was sharply divided on what it achieved."<sup>84</sup> Wilson, hoped these terms would help him win a referendum for continued British EEC membership.

### 2.4.3 1975s Referendum on EEC membership

Britons got their first say on EEC membership on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1975. Wilson's government was split, and he allowed his ministers to campaign on either side of the argument. As in the 2016 referendum, the *Remain Campaign* was far better funded than the *Leave Campaign*. The majority of the political parties and politicians also campaigned for remain in 1975 and 2016. One of the notable differences between 1975s and 2016s was the support of the media. In 1975, the vast majority of the media were in favour of remain. However, in 2016 this wasn't the case Oliver Daddow argues that, "in a variety of ways and for various reasons the British media, have been on a journey between 1973 and the present from permissive consensus to destructive dissent."<sup>85</sup> This change in stance in the media meant politicians

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p.81.

<sup>83</sup> George. (1994): p.88.

<sup>84</sup> Gowland, Turner, and Wright. (2008): p.82.

<sup>85</sup> Oliver Daddow, "The UK Media and "Europe" : From Permissive Consensus to Destructive Dissent," *Royal Institute of International Affairs* 88, no. 6 (2012). (2012): p.1219.

found it increasingly difficult to make the positive case for British membership of the EU. The EU also became a scapegoat for many problems in Britain.

The *Remain Side* won the referendum in 1975, by a comfortable margin. Gowland and others point out that, “the referendum provided a clear endorsement of British membership of the EEC.”<sup>86</sup> The anti-marketeters didn’t go away, they became known as Eurosceptics as time went by. The signal was clear in 1975, however, some fought a long battle for another referendum. An important point of note is that Britons voted to remain part of an economic partnership with their European neighbours in 1975. As I have outlined earlier the economic conditions in Britain weren’t great in the 1970s, so it was thought an economic union was a good idea. By the time of the referendum in 2016, Britain was part of a political as well as an economic union. It has been said some of the people who voted yes in 1975 voted leave in 2016. The reason behind this is they believed in the economic union and saw the possible benefits in 1975. However, they wanted little part in a political union and what they saw as the EU interfering in British affairs.

## 2.5 A new dawn? British European policy after The Maastricht Treaty

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, “the history of the modern Eurosceptic movement begins with Margaret Thatcher’s<sup>87</sup> 1988 speech in Bruges.”<sup>88</sup> The article goes onto argue that Euroscepticism was traditionally the role of the left. The left seen the EEC as a capitalist club and an obstacle in the way of a truly socialist Britain. However, this view eroded over time with the left realising Europe was a way of introducing socialism via the back door. “Thatcher set out to define a new Conservative take on the then EEC. She identified the two Foundational principles of the movement which were national sovereignty and genuine free

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<sup>86</sup> Gowland, Turner, and Wright. (2008): p.83.

<sup>87</sup> Margaret Thatcher, 13/10/1925 – 08/04/2013, Conservative Prime Minister 1979-1990.

<sup>88</sup> The Telegraph view, "Tories Must Return to the Foundational Principles of Euroscepticism," *The Daily Telegraph*, 14/10/2017.

markets.”<sup>89</sup> Thatcher had set out a dream for many Eurosceptics here, a vision of a very different Britain, a Britain which would be a truly independent nation state.

### 2.5.1 The Maastricht Treaty

Great Britain signed and adopted the terms of The Maastricht Treaty. Thus, the union with Europe was no longer just an economic one, it became a political one as well. The British people got no say in the terms of a referendum on this. Given that in 1975 Britons had voted to remain part of an economic union, it comes as little surprise there were significant divisions in British politics over Maastricht, particularly, in the Conservative Party. Some Conservative MPs were proud of Britain’s ancient institutions, and saw the need to protect them against what they saw as the erosion of sovereignty to the EU. Although some Labour MPs would have shared the same views, it was the Conservatives who saw the most infighting over Maastricht. Daddow points out that:

The Conservative Party discovered in the Maastricht negotiations, the effects of which are still being felt, the issue of Europe has the potential to create as many tensions within Britain’s two leading parties as between them.<sup>90</sup>

The Conservatives under Major won the 1992 general election. Major inherited four problems which would haunt his successors too: Europe, “The Persian Gulf, Ireland and the Balkans.”<sup>91</sup> Why were certain members of Major’s party so angry over The Maastricht Treaty? The most publicised issue at Maastricht according to Judt was, “the talk of a common European currency, this also caught the attention of the public.”<sup>92</sup> The UK signed the main body of the treaty but opted out of the proposed common currency. Judt argues that, “any step towards integration put off Britain, they seen it as a further step to a European super state.”<sup>93</sup> Ken Clarke, one of Major’s cabinet ministers and longstanding pro-European

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Daddow. (2004): p.7.

<sup>91</sup> Tombs. (2014): p.826.

<sup>92</sup> Judt. (2005): p.715.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p.715.

states that, “ the cabinet had agreed to support the treaty, so long as Britain was allowed the option of ‘not necessarily’ participating in the creation of the single currency and Social Chapter.”<sup>94</sup> Clarke gives the picture of unity here, however, “there were twenty-two rebel Conservative MPs who voted against the Maastricht Bill almost bringing down the government they were part of.”<sup>95</sup>

But why were these twenty-two MPs so disloyal to their party and Prime Minister? Importantly, the rebellion was backed by former Prime Minister Margret Thatcher. Although she resigned her premiership she had been forced into this decision by members of her own party. Those loyal to Thatcher had never forgiven those who had forced her out. Significantly, Thatcher herself had said she would not have signed the Maastricht Bill. Major’s election victory in 1992 was somewhat of a surprise for pundits but it did help legitimise his premiership. Gowland and others point out that, “this victory came at a high price for Major. Firstly, some of the new Conservative MPs proved to be highly Eurosceptic. Secondly, the governments majority was slashed from 88 to just 21.”<sup>96</sup> Although minority governments can help governments to keep their rebels in line, on such controversial issues as Europe things can be a lot more difficult.

For the British Eurosceptics, any attempts at closer European integration have always been met with scorn. Long-term Conservative Eurosceptics such as Bill Cash and Bernard Jenkin were never going to accept Maastricht. Despite the fact Major had won important concessions such as the opt out on the proposed common currency. The Maastricht rebellion also attracted some new Eurosceptics who would go on to make significant contributions to their cause, for example, Daniel Hannan<sup>97</sup>. “Hannan wrote to the twenty-two rebellious MPs and offered himself as a researcher. Around a dozen of them formed the European research group, with Hannan as its secretary.”<sup>98</sup> *The Guardian* columnist Sam Knight whom I quote here, has even went as far as to writing an essay on Hannan, describing him as ‘the man who brought you Brexit’. Another British journalist Tim Shipman

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<sup>94</sup> Ken Clarke, *Kind of Blue, a Political Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 2016). p.256.

<sup>95</sup> Sam Knight, "The Man Who Brought You Brexit," *The Guardian*, 29/11/2016.

<sup>96</sup> Gowland, Turner, and Wright. (2008): p.120.

<sup>98</sup> Knight. (2016):



has described Hannan as, “the intellectual godfather of what would become *The Leave campaign*.”<sup>99</sup> The Maastricht rebellion marked the beginning of the modern Eurosceptic movement. Although very much on the side-lines for a number of years, it was partly because of these persistent, hard-working Eurosceptics that David Cameron called a referendum on EU membership. Moreover, without their hard work and campaigning in the run-up to the referendum there would have been no Brexit.

## 2.5.2 New Labour and Europe

Labour won the 1997 general election by a landslide. Tony Blair was the man who took Labour from opposition to a party of government. From been a largely left wing, Eurosceptic party in the 70s Labour moved to become a centrist pro-European party. By the time of the Brexit referendum hardly any Labour MPs openly campaigned for leave. Blair had flooded the party with centrist candidates side-lining the left and the Eurosceptics. This was a remarkable journey for a party, especially considering the traditional working-class Labour areas largely voted to leave the EU, often by a large majority. Labour MPs who continue to make the case for leaving EU find themselves very much on the side-lines. For example, Frank Field, who represents Birkenhead, has attempted to smooth the Brexit process by trying to set a fixed date for leaving in parliament. His own constituency voted leave, yet despite this his efforts have been met with scorn from his fellow Labour MPs. As with the Conservative Party, Europe has proved a very decisive issue for Labour.

Blair himself would reside in Ten Downing Street from 1997 till 2007. From the onset of his premiership Blair liked to have control. After 18 years of Tory rule it felt like a new dawn had broken in Britain, and Blair was keen to make the most of this. Blair, a self-described ‘modern’ man was keen to have control of all aspects of government. In fact, “it became popular to characterise Blair’s style as presidential and to associate government policy on Europe with the Prime Minister.”<sup>100</sup> However, with thorny issues such as the single currency this would be no easy ride for the Blair. How, then would Blair address the issues between Britain and the European Union, and get the ever increasing Eurosceptic British public on-board.

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<sup>99</sup> Shipman. (2016): p.6.

<sup>100</sup> Anthony Seldon, *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2007). p.534.

Daddow, in his study of British and European integration points out that:

Blair drew on post-war developments in European integration to argue that, 'the history of our engagement with Europe is one of opportunities missed - and Britain suffering as a result'.<sup>101</sup>

This is an extract of Blair's speech to mark the opening of the European Research Institute at the University of Birmingham. Blair ended the speech by saying, "Britain's future is Europe".<sup>102</sup> Blair would seem very much to be aware of the history of the topic in this speech. He believed that Britain had missed out in the past as many historians of British and European integration have argued. It is also clear that he intended his tenure to be different, a one where Britain wouldn't miss out, and would find its future in Europe. But would Blair be any more successful than those who had served before him? Moreover, would Blair be able to convince the ever-increasing Eurosceptic British public that Britain's future lay in Europe? The public had given Blair a very large mandate in 1997, but Blair would see this decrease in future elections. The distrust over Blair's European policy, and the disastrous Iraq war were part of the reasons for this marked decrease in popularity.

Blair makes a number of points on Europe in his memoirs, while one should proceed with caution when using a politician's memoirs as a source. In the case of Blair, it is very likely that he wanted to create a positive image for himself after leaving office, particularly given that his image had been scarred greatly over the Iraq war. Nonetheless, it is interesting to get Blair's personal views on Europe which help to better understand British European policy during his time in office.

Blair described himself as a 'modern' man and his views on Europe were no different:

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<sup>101</sup> Daddow. (2004): p.6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.p.6 (Both footnotes are citations of Tony Blair's speech at the University of Birmingham, which Oliver Daddow has referenced to in his book).

For me, Europe was a simple issue. It was to do with the modern world. I supported the Europe ideal, it was utterly straightforward: in a world of new emerging powers, Britain needed Europe in order to exert influence and advance its interests. It wasn't complicated. It was a practical question of realpolitik.<sup>103</sup>

As leader of the opposition Blair had received advice from other world leaders as to how to lead and govern. The leader of Singapore gave Blair the following advice on governing: "keep the Thatcher reforms but get rid of this madness on Europe. Britain can't afford to be out of Europe in the world as it is today."<sup>104</sup> Blair also claims he was also told the same thing by the Indian Prime Minister and the Chinese. From this one can conclude that Blair was a pro-European leader. Maybe it was the other world leaders whom had had an influence on Blair, or maybe he genuinely believed Britain's future lay in Europe. Whatever the case, Blair and new Labour would push Britain much closer to European integration making him arguably Britain's most pro-European leader since Edward Heath.

### 2.5.3 The accession of the A10 countries

In May 2004, ten<sup>105</sup> new countries became full members of the European Union. The original European Community the forerunner of the EU was made up of six founding members, at the time of writing the European Union now has 28 full members. With membership came the free movement of goods, capital and labour. With average wages been considerably less in, for example, Poland and Hungary in comparison to other EU members, such as, Britain and Germany, it is understandable that some Poles and Hungarians, for instance, would seek to work in other EU member states. This presented a problem to the richer longstanding EU members. Would the richer countries suddenly be full of newcomers seeking work and a place to live?

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<sup>103</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010). p.533.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p.534.

<sup>105</sup> A10 countries: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

To counter this, the EU put in place transitional rules which basically meant that member states didn't have to take in migrants from new members states straight away. Germany, for example, followed these transitional rules, interestingly Great Britain didn't. Why did Britain choose not to adopt the same rules which Germany had done? The Germans were able to control migrant numbers right up until 2011. Yet Britain decided to open up its doors straight away. In his memoirs Blair states, "we had been staunch advocates of enlargement. It was a big moment."<sup>106</sup> This was the biggest enlargement of the EU, it was indeed a big moment. In a *Daily Telegraph* article from 2000 Blair had stated his desire for a 'larger' EU. "on enlargement, he called for the first wave of applicant countries, to be made members in time to take part for the 2004 Euro elections."<sup>107</sup> Clearly Blair had a desire to follow this policy through and that he did. As to opting out of transnational immigration controls, perhaps Blair was trying to improve his image abroad, it had been severely damaged over Iraq. On the other hand, perhaps he was following his belief that Britain's future lay in Europe and the integration in 2004 was part of that future. Blair's decision would have a profound impact on British society and it was an impact which the Eurosceptics would use to further argue their case.

Blair, has recently stated that, "he underestimated the number of workers from the new member states who came to the UK to work after 1 May 2004."<sup>108</sup> However, he was also keen to stress that, "it was a very different time back then and the economy was doing well."<sup>109</sup> It seems like Blair hadn't thought through how much stress this would place on schools and other public services. It would also force wages down, something Blair has also recently admitted; however, he claims this was only a slight decrease. The people who were most aggrieved about such changes in British society mainly came from working class areas; ironically from traditionally strong Labour Party areas. However, in light of the new direction taken by the Labour Party coupled with the new immigration policy, they began to find themselves politically homeless.

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<sup>106</sup> Blair. (2010): p.501.

<sup>107</sup> Benedict Brogan, "Blair Wants Eu to Become Superpower," *The Telegraph*, 07/10/2000.

<sup>108</sup> Laura Hughes, "Tony Blair Admits He Did Not Realise How Many Migrants Would Come to the Uk after Eu Expanded " *ibid.*, 19/03/2017.

<sup>109</sup> Arj Singh, "Brexit Could Be Reversed If Eu Agrees to Immigration Deal, Tony Blair Says," *The Independent* 10/11/2017.

Why were the British working class so annoyed? The vast majority of the new migrants worked hard, paid their taxes and generally made good contributions to British society. Some of the public believed (fuelled by Britain's Eurosceptic media), that the new arrivals were stealing their jobs, doing jobs cheaper, particularly, in the building trade, and using public services which either they didn't have access to themselves or had to wait a long time to access such as the National Health Service. Such sentiments would fuel a new kind of Euroscepticism, a one still concerned about British sovereignty, but notably more xenophobic than the type of Euroscepticism found on the right of the Tory Party and on the left of the Labour Party.

There were many benefits of New Labour's mass immigration policies. New workers, mainly from Eastern Europe came to Britain and worked hard paid their taxes and made a contribution to British society. However, there were some negative consequences as well. In a very short space of time British society was changed significantly and perhaps irreversibly. The new immigrants required places to live and work, whole streets and estates were changed in a very short space of time. It was predominately young men whom came to work in the UK. Streets which had previously been full of families suddenly found themselves sharing the street with lots of young men. Wages, in traditional working-class jobs such as building work went down significantly in a short space of time. For Instance, in 2004, the day rate for a brick-layer in Southampton was £120, a year later it was £60 pound.<sup>110</sup> For others, however, these changes were positive, "the results in London and especially for middle-class Londoners have been highly positive, a new multitude of cheap servants are now available."<sup>111</sup> While some seen the benefits of this policy, a great many didn't see any. Ironically, it was those whom the Labour Party had traditionally represented who arguably seen the least benefits. New Labour had become more of a middle-class liberal party than a party which represented the working classes. In the Brexit referendum, the least affluent parts of Britain mainly voted *Leave*. In the next section I will discuss UKIP who were able to tap into these disenfranchised voters and help bring about Brexit.

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<sup>110</sup> Anne Mari Syrstad, "Fra Liberalisme Til Populisme: Det Britiske Labour-Partiets Skiftende Standpunkt Til Arbeidsinnvandring Fra Øst-Europa 2002-2010" (Master University of Bergen, 2016). Taken from the authors interview with John Denham, former Labour MP for Southampton.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Hitchens, "The Real Villain Behind the Windrush Scandal? Once Again, It's Blair," *The Mail on Sunday*, 22/04/2018.

## 2.5.4 Populism and Euroscepticism

The United Kingdom Independence Party UKIP was founded by historian Alan Sked, originally Sked had founded the Anti-Federalist League in 1991 to campaign against the Maastricht Treaty. In 1993, Sked happy with how he performed when standing for election changed the party name to UKIP. Sked's aims were to run a moderate anti-Brussels party, perhaps this is why in 1997 he resigned from the party. Sked was interviewed in 2014 by the *Guardian* newspaper, the title of the article quoting sked, 'the party has become a Frankenstein's monster' says a lot about what Sked thinks about the party he created. Sked points out that, "prior to 1997 prospective party members had to sympathetic to the following: It's a non-sectarian, non-racist party with no prejudices against foreigners or lawful minorities of any kind."<sup>112</sup> Sked goes on to say that he had no other option but to resign in 1997 due to the party been taken over by the far-right.

After Sked left, the criteria he had set down for prospective members was scrapped. The party went from been a liberal democratic one, to a populist far-right party who would benefit greatly from the institution they claimed to want to leave. Sked, never had any intention of sending candidates to Brussels to serve as MEPs. The new style UKIP had every intention of doing this to claim the very generous expenses which an MEP can claim, ironically UKIP would have struggled to exist without the generous funds from the EU. Former party leader, Nigel Farage, even went as far as boasting "he claimed over 2 million pounds in expenses from the EU to fund his anti-EU message."<sup>113</sup>

UKIP funded by wealthy backers such as Aaron Banks and EU expenses would go to have a profound effect on British politics. The first past the post electoral system in Britain meant despite been able to get many votes they struggled to get MPs into Westminster. However, European parliament elections were a different story, the turnout is traditionally much lower

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<sup>112</sup> Stuart Jeffries, "Ukip Founder Alan Sked: 'The Party Has Become a Frankenstein's Monster'," *The Guardian* 26/05/2014.

<sup>113</sup> Toby Helm, "Ukip Leader Nigel Farage Boasts of His £2m in Expenses," *The Guardian*, 24/05/2009.

at European elections than national ones. “With each direct election to the European parliament the turnout fell.”<sup>114</sup> Add to this the proportional representation system of European elections, and it becomes fertile ground for far-right parties across the European Union. Discussing the EU’s enlargement in 2004 Judt points out that, “the enlargement itself helped trigger this backlash. In Britain, the Europhobic UKIP and white-supremacist British National Party between them took 21 percent of the vote, promising to keep the UK clear of ‘Europe’ and protect it from the anticipated onrush of immigrants.”<sup>115</sup>

So, while been able to get candidates into the European Parliament via elections not many cared about how would UKIP have any effects on politics in Britain? UKIP mainly took votes from Labour in traditional working-class areas, areas which hadn’t benefitted as much from migration as metropolitan cities such as London had. People also like to use Europe as some sort of scapegoat for their problems, this was a message also conveyed by some of the British press, the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, for example. Traditional British working-class areas were perfect for UKIP, while it was extremely difficult to get a candidate into Westminster, they done enough to frighten Labour and at times the Conservatives that they may lose a seat to UKIP and pressure them into more Eurosceptic policies. The fear of losing votes to UKIP was one of the reasons Prime Minister David Cameron called a referendum on EU membership. Some Eurosceptic Conservative voters had strayed over to UKIP as well as two of his own MPs whom defected to UKIP. Despite never been much of a presence in Westminster ultimately UKIP got what they wanted, a referendum on EU membership.

## 2.6 Concluding remarks

Stephen George coined the term ‘an awkward partner’ in his 1990 book, *An awkward partner Britain in the European Community*. As I have discussed the term is very apt when describing Britain’s relationship with Europe. The original European community became the European Union in the 1990s. Since then Britain has remained an awkward partner often to the dismay of her European allies. Historians and academics have disagreed on Britain’s place in Europe and on European integration. At times politicians have drawn on historical

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<sup>114</sup> Judt. (2005): p.730.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.731.

arguments to make their case both on the pro-European side and Eurosceptic side. Britain's two main political parties have been and still are very divided over the European issue. The divisions in the Conservative Party, and fear of losing votes to UKIP were two of the factors which contributed to the calling of Britain's second referendum on EU membership. Some of the events I have discussed in this chapter were hotly debated by all sides in the run-up to the Brexit referendum.



## Chapter 3: Before the referendum

### 3.1 Introduction

The following chapter will begin by analysing the letter *Historians for Britain* wrote to the *Times*, on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013. To the best of my knowledge, this was the first offering from *Historians for Britain*, and for that matter any other historians in a national media platform to the debate on Britain's place in Europe. At this stage, it was still unclear as to whether there would be a referendum on EU membership. It was, however, suspected that it may well be on the horizon in the not so distance future, and of course hoped for by Eurosceptics. This letter marks the beginning of the historical side of the debate something which would continue right up to the Brexit referendum, and afterwards. Eurosceptic British academics are nothing new. What was new is a group of historians coming together in the way *Historians for Britain* in this particular debate. In this chapter, I will discuss the reasons for the formation of this group and others as well as their motivations for doing so. I will also look at what arguments and activities these groups of historians promoted. The time period for this chapter is 2013-2016. This will allow me to discuss the contributions of my actors to the debate up until the referendum.

### 3.2 *Historians for Britain* letter to the *Times*

Historians of diverse areas of the past and from various political schools of thought made their views known to the public: before, during and after the Brexit debate. *Historians for Britain* went to the national press on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, they wrote a letter which was published in the *Times* calling for a 'better deal' with the EU.<sup>116</sup> They began the letter by offering old arguments such as: Britain has developed traditions and practices which are peculiar to our shores, ideas such as Common Law and parliamentary sovereignty to the struggle for greater democracy and fairness.

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<sup>116</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-need-a-new-deal-on-europe-or-we-quit-say-historians-g7q3vqvbnkn> (Letter and list of signatories available here.) Retrieved 05/12/2017.

These arguments featured prominently in Alan MacFarlane's<sup>117</sup> 1978 book, *The Origins of English individualism*. MacFarlane's work caused controversy when it was published.

MacFarlane went against conventional views propounded by influential scholars such as Marx, Weber and Macauley. He argued, that the English peasantry declined as a social group, production became more market focussed and rural 'individualism' arose. By placing these events in 13<sup>th</sup> century, he argued, that England was 'different' from the rest of Europe for at least 500 preceding the industrial revolution.<sup>118</sup>

One could perhaps also categorise *Historians for Britain* arguments as a kind of English<sup>119</sup> Sonderweg. Sonderweg is a term most often associated with German history:

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many German historians were convinced of the existence of a positive 'German Way'. They liked to stress certain basic German specifics, consistent with the German geographical and historical pattern.<sup>120</sup>

One could also apply this term to *Historians for Britain's* interpretation of English history, they argue throughout that English history has followed a 'special path' setting it apart from its European neighbours.

The arguments that, "Britain has developed traditions and practices peculiar to our shores,"<sup>121</sup> aren't, as MacFarlane's work demonstrates anything new. 20<sup>th</sup> century historical

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<sup>117</sup> Alan Macfarlane, born 20/12/1941, historian and anthropologist, Professor Emeritus of Kings College, Cambridge.

<sup>118</sup> Frederic L. Pryor, "Review of " the Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition" by A. Macfarlane," *Journal Of Economic Literature* 18, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>119</sup> I use English and not British as the arguments *Historians for Britain* and Macfarlane promote mainly refer to English history. For example, Common law.

<sup>120</sup> Jürgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate About the German Sonderweg," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no. 1 (1988).

<sup>121</sup> Various Authors, "Time for 'a Better Deal' with the Eu," *The Times*, 03/07/2013.

scholars such as G.M. Trevelyan<sup>122</sup> and A.J.P. Taylor<sup>123</sup>, have also argued that, “English history was exceptional, with particular reference to its separation from the continent.”<sup>124</sup> What was new with the arguments made in the *Times* was a group of historians invoking arguments on English exceptionalism, to make the case for ‘a better deal’ with the EU in 2013, and going to the national press with it. At this stage, the group wanted to see if the British government could change Britain’s membership to protect British values. Although the list of signatories to this letter was short (twenty-two), this does not mean that it was insignificant.

The historians who signed the letter are well known amongst academics and some of them are well-known to the British public. Most of them, were affiliated with a university. In an interview with *Historians for Britain* founder Oliver Lewis I found out the reasoning for the list been rather short. Lewis argued that, they went for quality over quantity. An effort was also made to have a right/left split in terms of politics. The left-wing historians proved more difficult to recruit. Having David Starkey<sup>125</sup>, on-board was important to *Historians for Britain*. Starkey is well known to the British people as he is regularly features on TV and radio. Having photos of David Starkey beside David Abulafia<sup>126</sup>, ticked all the boxes according to Lewis, there was one of Britain’s most televised historians next to the distinguished academic Abulafia.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, 16/02/1876 – 21/07/1962, British historian, Regius Professor of history at University of Cambridge, great-nephew of Thomas Macaulay, another well-known historian of the ‘Whig’ tradition, described by E.H. Carr as one of the last historians of the ‘Whig’ tradition.

<sup>123</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, 25/03/1906 – 07/09/1990, English historian who specialised in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European history.

<sup>124</sup> Oliver Daddow, "Euroscpticism and the Culture of the Discipline of History," *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006). p.322.

<sup>125</sup> David Starkey, born 03/01/1945, historian and television personality.

<sup>126</sup> David Abulafia, born 12/12/1949, Professor Emeritus of Mediterranean history at The University of Cambridge, former *Historians for Britain* chairman.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.

### 3.2.1 The formation of *Historians for Britain* and *Academics for Britain in Europe*

In the summer of 2012, veteran Eurosceptic Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan met with the British political strategist and lobbyist Matthew Elliot. It was at this meeting he asked Elliot to run a campaign to make the case for Great Britain to leave the European Union. Hannan was so impressed with how Elliot had run the campaign no to AV<sup>128</sup> (alternative vote system) against the rails, that he asked him to run the campaign what would eventually become *Vote Leave*. According to the *Guardian* columnist Sam Knight, “since the age of 19 Hannan has devoted his life to making the case for the UK to leave the EU.”<sup>129</sup> He has mainly done this from across the Channel, as an MEP<sup>130</sup> based in Brussels. Soon after the meeting in 2012, Hannan and Elliot set about starting *Business for Britain* a Eurosceptic think-tank. Their idea was to set up a number of sectoral groups, such as, farmers for Britain, students for Britain and Sikhs for Britain. Hannan mentioned a number groups in his book published after the referendum victory called *What Next. Historians for Britain* is one of the sectoral groups Hannan mentioned.

David Abulafia was the chairman of *Historians for Britain*, board members were: Dr Shelia Lawlor (director of a right-wing think-tank and a historian), Dr Andrew Roberts<sup>131</sup> and Dr David Starkey. One could make the argument that the board members of *Historians for Britain* were all well-established historians. Would this have any impact on the number of

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<sup>128</sup> This was the first referendum in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. The referendum concerned whether or not to replace the ‘first past the post’ system with the ‘alternative vote’ system. The result went in favour of keeping the original system.

<sup>129</sup> Knight. (2016):

<sup>130</sup> Hannan is a Conservative elected member of the European parliament. Throughout his career he has argued for Britain to leave the union, in effect Hannan has argued to get rid of his own job. As when Britain leaves the EU it won’t be possible to send any MEPs to the European parliament.

<sup>131</sup> Andrew Roberts, born 13/01/1963, British historian and journalist, Visiting Professor at the department of War Studies, Kings College London, has been described as the leading Eurosceptic historian.

historians they attracted to contribute research and support the group? Would a right/left split in terms of political stance be achievable? Arguably desirable, as they are a number of left and right Eurosceptic arguments, as well as the potential to better engage with the public. Would a gender balance be achievable or at least something close to one? I will offer insights to these questions in the following chapters.

*Academics for Britain in Europe*, had supporters from various academic disciplines including history. One click on the historians section of the website will take the reader into *Historians for Britain in Europe*. Andrew Knapp<sup>132</sup> is a British historian whose main research interests are the French government and politics. Knapp is a supporter of *Historians for Britain in Europe*. In 2017, he reflected on his involvement with the group and the Brexit debate, and subsequently published an article in a French academic journal. Knapp, has also been kind to send me a copy of this. Like their counterparts *Historians for Britain in Europe* also started by writing a letter to the *Times*. Knapp has stated that he cares about Britain's relationship with the EU. Having taken early retirement in 2015 he thought they really weren't any excuses not to get involved in the debate. Previously, Knapp hadn't involved himself much in politics.<sup>133</sup>

It was Knapp who decided to write the letter to the *Times*, having been provoked by a very belated awareness of the existence of *Historians for Britain*, who Knapp seen as opponents. The draft was done by Knapp, Beatrice Heuser a historian of international relations and Richard Overy the military historian. They argue in the letter that, the challenges facing Britain, for instance, "a confrontational Russia, multiple conflicts in the Middle East and a refugee crisis are better faced co-operatively with the EU."<sup>134</sup> This is a very different argument than the one *Historians for Britain* deployed. According to *Historians for Britain in Europe*, British history had not followed 'a special path', on the contrary they argue that, Britain is better off when part of a union with her European neighbours, and its history only understood as part of a greater whole.

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<sup>132</sup> Andrew Knapp, British historian, Professor Emeritus with the University of Reading, *Historians for Britain in Europe* supporter.

<sup>133</sup> Andrew Knapp, "Historians for Britain in Europe – a Personal History," *Historie@Politique* 31, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>134</sup> Various Authors, "Historians for the Eu," *The Times*, 29/01/2016.

### 3.2.2 *Historians for Britain* overview

In an email correspondence between myself and Oliver Lewis, Lewis pointed out that David Abulafia was one of main driving forces behind the campaign. Lewis helped set up the group when he was working at the Eurosceptic think-tank *Business for Britain*. Lewis also had the idea of getting historians to write a letter to the *Times* making the case for ‘a better deal’ with the EU. Lewis, had taken some inspiration from a letter a group of historians had written to the same newspaper urging people to vote no to AV. Historians, including David Abulafia, David Starkey and Niall Ferguson used historical arguments to make the case not to reform the voting system<sup>135</sup>. However, on that occasion it was just a letter. *Historians for Britain* would go much further than writing a letter to the *Times*.<sup>136</sup> While trying to gather signatures Lewis met Abulafia, who was a great supporter and wanted to help rally Eurosceptics in academia in order to provide a historical perspective to the campaign for a looser relationship with the EU. Lewis agreed to help and this turned into *Historians for Britain*.<sup>137</sup>

As *Historians for Britain* were the first historical actors to come forward in the Brexit debate, it is worthy of looking into how they were organised and how they viewed themselves. If one goes to the about section on former *Historians for Britain* website one would might come to the conclusion that *Historians for Britain* was a campaign group. The group was made up of a number of different historians from varying historical and political schools of thought, and as I will argue varying levels of support from its supporters<sup>138</sup>.

In the email correspondence, I had with Abigail Green<sup>139</sup> a former *Historians for Britain* supporter, she argued that *Historians for Britain* wasn’t a campaign group, and it is perhaps wrong to call them this. The reasons she gives for this are: that the original letter to the

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<sup>135</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/history-teaches-us-to-vote-no-to-av-087f5zb087q> (Full letter and list of signatories.) retrieved 01/04/2018.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.

<sup>137</sup> Email correspondence with Oliver Lewis, 18/09/2017.

<sup>138</sup> Abigail Green didn’t sign any further letters; however, she did not withdraw her name from *Historians for Britain*.

<sup>139</sup> Abigail Green, born 12/05/1971, British historian, Professor of Modern European history at Brasenose College, Oxford, former *Historians for Britain* supporter.

*Times* was essentially a call for renegotiation of the relationship between the EU taking into account especially the situation created by the Euro. At the time of the letters publication, southern Europe in particular Greece had major fiscal problems. Green goes on further to say, in the lead up to the referendum campaign, those associated with the group were consulted about what stance *Historians for Britain* should take with regard to the different branches of the *Leave Campaign*. It was at this point that, Abulafia informed Green that the balance of opinion was about 2/3 leave and 1/3 remain.<sup>140</sup> Such a division on opinion would most likely make for an ineffective campaign group. Yet the word campaign comes up seven times in the short about section on the *Historians for Britain* web site. Moreover, statements such as: “dozens of Britain’s leading historians have already joined *Historians for Britain* campaign for a return of powers from the EU to the UK”<sup>141</sup>, give the impression that *Historians for Britain* was a campaign group.

David Abulafia has a slightly different take as to what type of organisation *Historians for Britain* was. Abulafia stated that it was, “a think-tank holding private and public meetings and discussions, with panels of historians and public figures.”<sup>142</sup> Perhaps this is a better description of *Historians for Britain* or at least their own understanding of themselves. It is arguably difficult to have a campaign group made up with people with different opinions on the issue the group is supposed to be campaigning about. As Green pointed out, the group was made up both of historians who wished to leave the EU and remain. Abulafia points out:

Initially we included both those who were certain the UK should leave the EU and others who argued for radical reform of the EU, when it became clear that the terms offered by David Cameron were very disappointing some members nonetheless preferred to remain in the EU, but most decided they had no option but to leave.<sup>143</sup>

Cameron like Harold Wilson in 1975, found it very difficult to get anything from the EU. While Cameron claimed to have secured a deal that gave Britain ‘special status’ in the 28-nation

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<sup>140</sup> Email correspondence with Abigail Green, 01/10/2017.

<sup>141</sup> Taken from former website of *Historians for Britain*.

<sup>142</sup> Email correspondence with David Abulafia, 17/10/2017.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

bloc, for sceptics this didn't go far enough. The key issue for sceptics was the issue of national sovereignty, while Cameron did secure a commitment to exempt Britain from 'ever closer union', this, however, didn't see a return of sovereignty to the Westminster parliament.<sup>144</sup>

Oliver Lewis take on the organisational structure of *Historians for Britain* was that it was an advocacy group a kind of hybrid between a think-tank and a campaign group. In terms of how *Historians for Britain* saw themselves Lewis stated that, they were trying to inject an intellectual well-reasoned, well-sourced argument into the debate.<sup>145</sup> Thus, giving some historical context to the Brexit debate.

There are a number of reasons why I have included an overview of *Historians for Britain* and not *Historians for Britain in Europe*. Firstly, and most importantly, I received the most source material from former *Historians for Britain*. As well as the referendum going the way which the majority of their supporters had hoped, I decided it was worth giving an overview of what type of group they were, and how they saw themselves.

### 3.3 Activities and arguments promoted by actor's pre-referendum

Firstly, one may well ask the question why should historians be promoting activities and arguments in the Brexit debate. Shouldn't they just teach history and write books and leave the debating, and informing of the public to politicians? In an interview on Irish radio, British journalist Peter Hitchens made a number of points which give weight to the argument historians should very much be involved. While discussing the 'Irish question', the Irish border been one of the most difficult issues in Brexit. "Hitchens argued, "during the long period when him and others had argued for a return to British sovereignty in vain, the

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<sup>144</sup> John Landale, "EU reform deal: What Cameron wanted and what he got." <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35622105>. (Retrieved 15/03/2018).

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.



problem was so many journalists and politicians didn't understand the European issue they didn't know the history of it nor how it worked. Hitchens also stated that he recommended two books<sup>146</sup>, one making the Eurosceptic case and the other the pro-European one he sees them as essential guides to understanding the issue. Hitchens, was at times dismayed that so many in politics and journalism knew so little of the facts in these two books."<sup>147</sup>

If one takes a look at the government recommendations for history teaching one will see there is no mention of British and European integration.<sup>148</sup> This is a little strange given that Britain's relationship with Europe has dominated politics for the past 60 years. Oliver Daddow also comments on this too in, *Euroscepticism and History education in Britain*:

the overly reverential attitude to recent history on the part of the British, and an almost total neglect of peacetime dimensions of modern European history since 1945, both serve to exaggerate the country to fall back on glib images as Britain as a great power.<sup>149</sup>

Given this, surely it is of upmost importance for historians to respond to the debate, make arguments and in general play an active role. After all, as E.H. Carr once said, "The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to understanding of the present."<sup>150</sup> According to Carr, historians have a role to play in the present and it is key they offer insights so that we can better understand the present.

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<sup>146</sup> Books Hitchens recommended to understand the European issue: Hugo Young, *This blessed plot*, (pro-European stance) and Christopher Booker, *The great deception, Can the European Union survive?* (Eurosceptic).

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEBhETERbRk> full interview available here. (retrieved 6/12/2017).

<sup>148</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/239035/PRIMA\\_RY\\_national\\_curriculum\\_-\\_History.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMA_RY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf) British school's history curriculum (retrieved 24/01/18).

<sup>149</sup> Oliver J. Daddow, "Euroscepticism and History Education in Britain," *Government and Opposition* 41, no. 1 (2006). p.66.

<sup>150</sup> Carr and Evans. (2001): p.20.

### 3.3.1 *Historians for Britain*: Response, Activities and Arguments

The Eurosceptic arguments put forward by *Historians for Britain* stirred up some controversy amongst academics. Their arguments showed that there would be no united view from the academic community in the Brexit debate. A small number of academics, preferred Britain to leave, a much larger number preferred Britain to remain but the vast majority remained silent. Those that remained silent may well have had their views, they simply choose not to express them publically. Oliver Lewis pointed out that, “a number of historians stated they agreed with *Historians for Britain’s* arguments and were sceptical of the European project, they chose, however, to remain out of the political side of things and didn’t put their names forward in support of *Historians for Britain*.”<sup>151</sup>

A *Guardian* article published after the referendum gives some indication as to why some may have chosen to remain silent. The articles title is, ‘*I voted for Brexit – why do academic colleagues treat me like a pariah.*’ The author is anonymous the series itself in the *Guardian* is called anonymous academics. A notable quote in the article is, “I never raise the matter, but it quickly becomes apparent that I disagree with the prevailing view (at least in the arts and humanities) that Britain’s withdrawal from the EU is and epic act of foolishness.”<sup>152</sup> The author also points that he/she worry about their prospects being harmed by admitting voting for Brexit. Perhaps this is part of the reason that so many academics remained silent or if they spoke out it was on the pro-European side. Moreover, it may well be a reason as to why *Historians for Britain* numbers in terms of supporters were so much lower than the pro-European side. I do, however, treat the *Guardian* article with a degree of scepticism. It is difficult to check any of the claims made as the author has remained anonymous.

In light of this political climate in the United Kingdom and its universities how did *Historians for Britain* and others respond to the Brexit debate, and would they take part in any activities and promote arguments? The short answer here is yes, they certainly responded to the debate, they also took part in a number of activities, for example, seminars, radio interviews and TV appearances. In terms of arguments promoted: a simplistic answer would be to say

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.

<sup>152</sup> Anonymous academic, "I Voted for Brexit – Why Do Academic Colleagues Treat Me Like a Pariah?," *The Guardian*, 15/09/2017.

they made a patriotic historical case for a radical new relationship between Britain and the EU. Sonderweg could be applied to the arguments *Historians for Britain* made as they argued that British history had followed a sort of special path. However, this is too simplistic an answer and a more thorough discourse analysis is necessary if one is to fully understand the arguments that were made.

*Historians for Britain* deployed a number of arguments in response to the Brexit debate. Someone who is familiar with British Eurosceptic arguments would also be familiar with the arguments *Historians for Britain* made. For instance, Peter Hitchens has argued that, "the EU's expansionism has brought war to Yugoslavia and Ukraine, and may yet cause more violence."<sup>153</sup> *Historians for Britain* also go into this argument, going against the belief that the EU has kept peace in Europe. Yet, Europe has enjoyed the longest period of peace since the formation of the EU. While it isn't this *Historians for Britain* argue against they argue that it is not the EU who has kept the peace but NATO. The failure of the EU to act in the former Yugoslavia is given as an example as the EU's failure to keep peace.

*Historians for Britain's* Nigel Jones<sup>154</sup> used his column in the *Daily Telegraph* (a British daily newspaper) to argue that it was NATO that had kept peace in Europe. In May 2016, Prime Minister Cameron made a speech in the British Museum where he argued that it was the EU who had preserved peace in Europe. A British exit would make it more likely that the continent would plunge into a reprise of The Two World Wars, this argued Jones was a classic example of the Orwellian big lie. An Orwellian big lie was the idea that if you are going to tell a lie, make it a big one, and if possible make it the exact opposite of the truth.<sup>155</sup> Clearly, Jones is in complete disagreement with what Cameron had argued in his speech.

Jones made a number of arguments in his article to show why he was in complete disagreement. Firstly, Jones argued that, the EU has already worsened – if it did not directly

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<sup>153</sup> Peter Hitchens, "An Archbishop Preaching Pure Nonsense " *The Mail on Sunday*, 10/06/2018.

<sup>154</sup> Nigel Jones, born 1951, British historian, journalist and biographer, former *Historians for Britain* supporter, used his position in the media to further promote *Historians for Britain's* arguments.

<sup>155</sup> Nigel Jones, "The Eu Does Not Preserve Peace in Europe – Instead It Has Brought Us Closer to War," *The Telegraph*, 09/05/2016.

cause – two armed conflicts on European soil in the former Yugoslavia and Ukraine. Jones argued that EU meddling stretched into Ukraine causing it to split into two. He also stated, that the failure of EU diplomacy helped speed Yugoslavia into a brutal civil war. In the end, a fragile peace was secured not by the EU, but by NATO bombs and arms twisting backed by the alliance’s military muscle.<sup>156</sup> Yet in 2012, the EU won the Nobel peace prize. The Nobel committee applauded the EU for its, “contribution over the past 60 years, ‘to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe’ and being instrumental in ‘transforming most of Europe from a continent of war to one of peace’.”<sup>157</sup> Clearly, there are a number of arguments both for the fact it was NATO which has kept peace in Europe, and that it was the EU which has kept peace. As the arguments involve history to some degree, it comes as no surprise that historians invoked these arguments when making their cases. Those in favour of EU membership argued that, Britain could only face up to modern conflicts in an alliance with her European neighbours. On the other hand, those who were Eurosceptic argued that the EU had even went as far to worsen or cause some conflicts

I suspect when the historians were putting pen to paper for *Historians for Britain*, Greece was experiencing major fiscal problems. This was used as an argument to show why Britain was right not to join the Euro. As well as being right to shun closer European integration as doing so could potentially ruin Britain’s economy, or mean Britain must come to the help of other European neighbours. More integration would also lead to loss of British sovereignty, something Eurosceptics have argued against for many years. The fact that many of laws have been made in Brussels and not in Britain has caused Eurosceptics great pain. *Historians for Britain* addressed this from a historical standpoint, arguing that Britain has always engaged with Europe, however, from a very different position from that of today. This is a particular example of where the idea of an English Sonderweg comes in. *Historians for Britain* and others who are Eurosceptic, see British institutions such as Parliament as ancient, unique and their preservation as of the utmost importance. Such long-standing institutions set English history apart from the rest of Europe. Any move towards as what they see as giving away sovereignty to the EU is wrong.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Andrew Williams, "How Valid Is the Claim That the Eu Has Delivered Peace in Europe?," *New Statesman*, 9/05/2016.

Two of *Historians for Britain's* essays which seemed to be in line with two of the most debated issues the run-up to the referendum were: Gwythian Prins<sup>158</sup> *Britain's EU membership potentially eroding her global influence*, and Oliver Lewis's *Harold Wilson's 1975 renegotiations with the EEC*. For the British Eurosceptics, Britain as a global trader not shackled by EU rules has been a longstanding dream. They believe Britain would be more successful outside of the EU as a free trading nation with the rest of the world. As for Wilson's 1975 renegotiations it was thought by many not just Eurosceptics that what Wilson got from the EEC didn't go far enough. It could be that this essay was produced with the hope that David Cameron would succeed in getting a better deal than Harold Wilson did. *Historians for Britain* had hoped for a deal which reflected Britain's unique history, as well as hopefully bringing about a much looser relationship with the EU.

The above paragraphs are a description of some of arguments promoted by *Historians for Britain*. The arguments promoted reflect a common theme from British Eurosceptics. Sovereignty is a key word they use in their cause. The idea of Britain making its own laws, without interference and hindrance from the EU is something which has always been of upmost importance to the Eurosceptics. Sovereignty is a word heard less frequently in other EU member states, yet in Britain it has galvanised a whole generation of Eurosceptics.<sup>159</sup> This argument has always been there in Britain right from the early days of European integration up to today. What is new is, a group of historians coming together in this way, and publically promoting these arguments, via their expertise in history, to make the case for a return of sovereignty to Britain.

*Historians for Britain* supporters wrote a number of different essays which were published in blog format on the *Historians for Britain* website. These blogs, by in large were quite sceptical of the European project and discussed European history with a Eurosceptic tone. Their target audience was the general public<sup>160</sup>, would members of the public actually take

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<sup>158</sup> Gwythian Prins, British historian, Emeritus Research Professor at The London School of Economics, former *Historians for Britain* supporter, contributor to *Briefings for Brexit*.

<sup>159</sup> Alex Barker, "Tory Eurosceptics Gather under Banner of Sovereignty," *The Financial Times* 09/06/2015.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.

any interest in a group of historians writing Eurosceptic essays? In short, the main point with the blogs is they offered something different to the Brexit debate. The arguments and narrative in them isn't something which was offered by the more populist UKIP type, they tended to use scare monger tactics on immigrant numbers. While one may well have disagreed with *Historians for Britain*, it is difficult to argue that they didn't offer something very different to the Brexit debate. This view is also shared by A.W. Purdue, a *Historians for Britain* supporter and author of one of the essays. Purdue argues that, "the group prided itself on taking a rational and analytical view as opposed to the more UKIPish and emotional view."<sup>161</sup>

It isn't possible to gauge whether the blogs actually swayed the British public to vote in a particular direction. But it is possible to say the *Historians for Britain* offered something to the debate via these blogs and other articles, as well as TV and radio appearances. Furthermore, it gave historians a platform to use their profession and to offer arguments to the debate. The Brexit referendum is one of the most important events in recent British history, it is also one where historical context in the debate was very important. One could argue, that it was a once in a lifetime chance for some historians to present their views and arguments to the public on the issue.

I have found a total of 18 different essays which were made available to the public via the *Historians for Britain* website. A number of their supporters put pen to paper and wrote these essays.<sup>162</sup> The essays were published between 2013 and 2016. I will now go deeper into the Oliver Lewis essay *Lessons from the 1975 EU renegotiation* and discuss some of the points he makes. Firstly, David Abulafia contributes with the foreword. In this he praises Lewis's work calling it, "a fascinating account and both a well-researched piece of history and an essay that makes one sit up and think on Britain's current discussions on the EU."<sup>163</sup> Abulafia makes some arguments which he would use again, "calling the 'European project' a

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<sup>161</sup> Email correspondence with A.W. Purdue, 16/10/2017.

<sup>162</sup> Oliver Lewis, David Abulafia, Nigel Saul, Robert Tombs, Andrew Roberts, Edward Hicks, Shelia Lawlor, Gwythian Prins, Adam Zamoyski, A.W. Purdue, Lee Rotherham, Irina Somerton, Tom Gallagher and Innes Jones, all wrote essays for *Historians for Britain*.

<sup>163</sup> Oliver Lewis to *Historians for Britain* 2015.

vague one as it doesn't allow for states (of which the UK isn't the only one) to value their own distinctive identity."<sup>164</sup> Here is one of the main arguments of *Historians for Britain*, it is, however, not an exclusive argument to *Historians for Britain* nor is it a new argument. Given that, British sovereignty has gradually eroded over the years particularly after Maastricht, it comes as no surprise that *Historians for Britain* and others continue to argue that British history has followed a special path, and has a distinctive identity which should be valued.

Lewis used a wide variety of sources including both primary and secondary as well as interviews with some of the key players. The text comes forward as academic in the sense of being well referenced and documented. At the same time, it is also accessible to the general public in terms of deploying a language accessible to non-experts. I would also add that this essay is an example of a historian's response to the Brexit debate. *Business for Britain*, had a year's long freedom of information battle to secure some documents from the Foreign Office, which Lewis has made use of in this essay.<sup>165</sup> By doing this Lewis was able to add substance to the common view from historians that Wilson achieved nothing but some cosmetic changes from the renegotiation 's with the European community, mainly changes to agricultural trade.

It is often, although, not always the work of the historian to uncover documents which may reveal something which isn't already known about the past. This essay is an example of *Historians for Britain* doing that work. The following quotes are examples of what the previously unreleased documents reveal about Wilson's renegotiations "Among officials it was – and still is – referred to as a 'so-called renegotiation'."<sup>166</sup> "Proposals that would require Treaty change were amended."<sup>167</sup> Treaty change would have meant more radical changes, in particular British sovereignty may not have been eroded has much as it has been. This work by Lewis and *Business for Britain*, was picked up by the national media in

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. Here Lewis quotes from an interview he had with Sir Michael Butler, Butler was a former British diplomat who served as head of the European integration department at the time of renegotiations.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Here is a quote from a confidential memo on renegotiations, released to *Business for Britain* under a freedom of information request. (The blog piece I reference to in footnotes 163-167 is no longer available online, I have included an extract of it in the appendices).

the UK. The *Telegraph* published an article where it was highlighted that, the minutes were released under a freedom of information act as their initial request was refused by the Foreign Office, saying the release “would prejudice the interest of the UK abroad. The decision was overruled by the Information Commissioner.”<sup>168</sup> Robert Oxley, the campaign director of *Business for Britain* was also quoted in the article, ““forty years ago, the public were denied the benefits of a genuine renegotiation by those who were determined that our future lay in the European Community regardless.”<sup>169</sup> *Historians for Britain* were determined that this wouldn't be the case in the Brexit referendum.

Another point of significance is Dominic Sandbrook, a British historian, columnist and TV presenter also discussed the lessons and similarities between Wilson's and Cameron's attempted negotiations. With all due respect to Oliver Lewis, Sandbrook is much better-known historian, he has presented a number of historical documentaries for the BBC. Sandbrook used his column in the socially Conservative British newspaper the *Daily Mail* to highlight some of the similarities between Wilson and Cameron, as well as their positions with European relations. He like Lewis was hopeful Cameron could avoid a Wilson type scenario where very little is achieved in negotiations, “with Britain facing an economic crisis and turmoil abroad the last thing we need is a second Harold Wilson.”<sup>170</sup> This view was shared by *Business for Britain* they argued that, “Britain should learn lessons from the past so that it is able to seek a genuinely improved deal from the EU today and that people are given a fair and informed choice in any EU referendum.”<sup>171</sup> Both pieces which I have briefly discussed here are a response to the Brexit debate. The platforms they used were very different, but they were both examples of a historical response. As historian G.R. Elton once argued, “history is not the study of the past, but the study of present traces of the past.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Matthew Holehouse, "How Harold Wilson Was Warned Europe Threatened British Democracy," *The Telegraph*, 27/08/2014.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, "Beware the Ghost of Slippery Harold: David Cameron's European Referendum Speech Was Hailed as a Masterstroke, but We've Been Here Before," *The Daily Mail*, 25/01/2013.

<sup>171</sup> Holehouse. (2014).

<sup>172</sup> Elton. (1967): p.20.



Lewis and Sandbrook have followed what Elton argued in his famous book *The Practice of history* when responding to the Brexit debate.

### 3.4 Other historian's responses to the Brexit debate

So far, I have discussed how *Historians for Britain* responded to the Brexit debate. In the following sections, I will discuss some of the responses of other historians who were affiliated to groups with very different views than those of *Historians for Britain*. Two examples of other groups which offered arguments to the Brexit debate are: *Academics for Britain in Europe* the historians who were supporters came under the section *Historians for Britain in Europe* and *Historians for History*. The narrative and analysis on these pages is very different from that on the pages of *Historians for Britain*. Another important point is *Historians for Britain in Europe* had the support of 380 historians that's a little over 8 times as many as *Historians for Britain*. This shows that, the view amongst historians who involved themselves publically in the Brexit debate was predominately a pro-European one.

In terms of the narrative of *Historians for Britain in Europe*, it would appear to be a similar one as the official *Remain Campaign* used in the Brexit referendum campaign. The historians who included well-known names such as: Richard Overby, Mary Beard<sup>173</sup> and at this stage pre- Brexit, Niall Ferguson, accepted that Britain does have a past, they also argued that the EU is not perfect. In this they are in agreement with *Historians for Britain*. But their arguments after this become very different. They believed it was best that Britain remained part of the EU. The reasoning for this is that Britain would be in a better position to reform the EU, and in a stronger position as part of the EU to assert global influence. *Historians for Britain in Europe* published research from 2015 up until the referendum. Prime Minister Cameron, and many others on the remain side made similar arguments throughout the referendum campaign. But how did these 380 historians articulate the historical case for Britain to remain part of the EU?

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<sup>173</sup> Mary Beard, born 1/1/1955, British historian, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, Beard is a well-known and active Twitter user, it was on this platform Beard made a pro-European case and argued with well-known Eurosceptics such as Arron Banks the businessman and UKIP financial backer.

The website of *Historians for Britain in Europe* contains a number of statements and articles written by some of its supporters; as well as this it also has links to newspaper articles and blogs by supporters and other like-minded individuals. This is different from *Historians for Britain* website; the longer essays aren't a part of *Historians for Britain in Europe's* content. Nonetheless, they still try to make a patriotic case for Britain to stay in Europe.

Richard Overy argued in a statement that:

British soldiers hadn't only fought to defend Britain in the two World Wars, but so that all Europeans should share the prospects of economic security, an end to tyranny and a common democratic culture.<sup>174</sup>

It is this idea of shared history and identity which comes through as the narrative on this website. Keith Thomas historian of early modern England argues:

the British Isles have always been part of a larger European entity, they have been ruled by the Romans, Danes, Frenchman, a Dutchman, and German Electors, later kings, of Hanover.<sup>175</sup>

Towards the end of the article Thomas also summed up by saying, "the historian can only marvel at what an astonishing phenomenon the European Union has been."<sup>176</sup> Overy sums up his piece with, "while not perfect the European Union, is preferable to the way Europe looked for much of the last century."<sup>177</sup> These are very different arguments than those offered by *Historians for Britain*. I will discuss these two very different articles from the opposing camps, in which both groups deployed arguments to the Brexit debate, as well as injecting a degree of historical context.

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<sup>174</sup> Richard Overy, "The European Union: To Leave or Not Leave?," *History today*, 18/05/2016.

<sup>175</sup> Keith Thomas to Academics for Britain in Europe, 01/06/2015.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Overy. (2016).

Neil Gregor<sup>178</sup> made some notable contributions to the historical debate on Brexit. Gregor welcomed *Historians for Britain* to the debate, while questioning their perspective of things. Gregor questioned *Historians for Britain's* version of Britain's past in May 2015, this is a month which seen a number of notable exchanges between historians in the media.

In a blog post, in the *Huffington Post* an American blog and opinion based website<sup>179</sup>, Gregor responded directly to *Historians for Britain's* letter to the *Times*, the creation of their website and David Abulafia's letter to the *History Today* magazine. Abulafia had wrote on behalf of *Historians for Britain* in his letter making the case for the need for such a group as *Historians for Britain*. In the first paragraph of his blog post, Gregor is keen to stress that, "it was a Conservative Prime Minister who took Britain into Europe, signed the Single European act<sup>180</sup> (Margaret Thatcher) and signed the Treaty of Maastricht (John Major)."<sup>181</sup> Thus, providing context for wide ranging discussions on British membership of the EU. Gregor argued, it will surely be necessary for historians to remind people of these facts as there is a danger that the debate could go off into mythologies. Gregor states that, it is the job of the historian to provide sober objective facts. Gregor argued that:

the formation of the pressure group '*Historians for Britain*', shows only too well, many of these mythologies that will circulate over the coming time will be penned by historians themselves.<sup>182</sup>

Gregor goes on to challenge some of the arguments which had been made by *Historians for Britain* in the rest of his blog piece. He pointed out that the list of Britain's 'leading' historians who were supporters *Historians for Britain* was actually quite thin. He also points out that

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<sup>178</sup> Neil Gregor, born 22/07/1969, British historian, Professor of Modern European History at The University of Southampton, vocal pro-European had a number of notable exchanges with Eurosceptic historians.

<sup>179</sup> Link also posted on *Historians for Britain in Europe* website.

<sup>180</sup> First major revision of the Treaty of Rome, the act set the European community objective of establishing a single market by 1992.

<sup>181</sup> Neil Gregor to The Huffington post, 14/05/2015.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

there were only one or two historians of modern European history. It is unsurprising, given that, British and European integration mainly come under modern European history that Gregor choose to point this out. I asked Oliver Lewis his thoughts on having modern European historians as supporters as *Historians for Britain*. He pointed out that, the two main criteria *Historians for Britain* had was quality and historians people knew about. As I previously discussed, having David Starkey and David Abulafia on board was an indication that they had achieved this. There was a hope for a more even balance of right and left historians as well as a more gender balanced group. Ultimately, this wasn't achieved just 6 of the 45 supporters were women. Lewis was keen to stress that this wasn't for lack of trying.<sup>183</sup> This lack of historians of modern Europe amongst *Historians for Britain's* supporters gave their opponents ammunition to denounce their arguments.

Gregor challenges *Historians for Britain* analysis on a number of occasions in his blog post. For instance, Gregor points out that in Britain, universal male suffrage was introduced in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain and women only got the vote in 1928. It is, however, worth noting that as early as 1848 Disraeli had said in the Commons, "if a woman could be head of a state and a landowner she could certainly exercise the vote."<sup>184</sup> I quote the famous Victorian politician here, as it is worthy of note that votes for women was something which was discussed in Britain long before they were introduced. The action proved much more difficult in a large state such as Britain with many smaller states introducing universal suffrage earlier.

Gregor thinks it is doubtless that the great authoritarian 'other' in *Historians for Britain* arguments was Germany. This, according to Gregor, is a little complicated given that, universal male suffrage was introduced in Germany in 1871 and votes for women immediately after the First World War.<sup>185</sup> Here it seems, what Gregor is trying to get at that is, Britain's history wasn't so unique and special. He also uses the example of imperialism to illustrate this point. "Imperialism hardly leaves British history as one which is exceptional. Exportation, slavery, massacres, expulsions, oppression anyone?"<sup>186</sup> Again, Gregor is making arguments which counter *Historians for Britain's*. Gregor's summing up of his article

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, 02/02/2018, London.

<sup>184</sup> Tombs. (2014): p.530.

<sup>185</sup> Gregor. (2015).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

is rather different, “any undergraduate can tell you there is something unique about the longevity of Britain’s parliamentary institutions, and right at the end dismissing, what he labels as *Historians for Britain’s* manifesto (the letter in history today) as nonsense.”<sup>187</sup> Here Gregor goes from offering counter arguments, to dismissing *Historians for Britain’s* arguments as nonsense.

How should one interpret Neil Gregor’s blog post *Historians, Britain and Europe*? His blog shows, is that it is indeed possible for an academic to make many valid responses to other academic’s arguments. I would also argue that in the case of the Brexit debate this was of upmost importance, that there wasn’t a united view in academia, that academics could offer differing arguments to the public. As I have already pointed out, knowledge of modern European history is lacking on British school’s curriculums and even amongst its political classes. At this important stage, one year prior to the referendum, some of the public may well have welcomed historical context. Moreover, some may have thought it necessary to have some understanding on the history of British and European relations before they decided how to vote.

But what was Gregor actually offering counter arguments too? The letter published in *History Today* described by Gregor as a ‘manifesto’ is also worthy of discussion. The title of the letter is, *Britain: apart from or a part of Europe?* Written by David Abulafia, it was published in *History Today* on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2015. The sub title is; The ‘Historians for Britain’ campaign believes that Britain’s unique history sets it apart from the rest of Europe. From this alone it is easy to see why Gregor choose to question *Historians for Britain* so much and I argue such questioning in a debate should be welcome. Abulafia was keen to stress, “that *Historians for Britain* aren’t hostile to Europe, at this stage they believed that in an ideal world Britain should remain in a reformed EU.”<sup>188</sup> Abulafia also makes the case for historical perspectives on Britain’s relationship with Europe, saying that, “the debate about that relationship has not just become lively but heated.”<sup>189</sup> Abulafia argues that, “the British political temper has been milder than that in larger European countries.”<sup>190</sup> English

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> David Abulafia, "Britain: Apart from or a Part of Europe?," *History today*, 11/05/2015.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

philosopher Roger Scruton who is known for his Conservative views has also made similar arguments on the British political temper:

common sense and compromise were the norms of English politics. Therefore, it is unsurprising that it is over 300 years since the last violent change in form of government in England. Only Denmark has a longer peaceful record.<sup>191</sup>

This quote from Scruton is evidence that *Historians for Britain's* arguments aren't confined to the historical profession.

In his final paragraph Abulafia states that *Historians for Britain* aims to facilitate the debate. He goes further to say, "the offer from the EU for a new relationship must reflect the distinctive character of the United Kingdom, rooted in its largely uninterrupted history since the middle ages."<sup>192</sup> Obviously, such statements are going to create a debate not just from other historians but amongst some of the public too. After all, the letter was published in a monthly history magazine. Perhaps that was Abulafia's intention, to create a debate amongst his colleagues and maybe amongst the British public. Such a debate amongst historians was picked up by other media outlets. Furthermore, both groups of historians got a national platform via a number of newspaper and magazine articles, and in some cases TV and radio appearances, as a consequence of these public disagreements.

### 3.4.1 Historians for history and other responses

Historians for history was originally set up in 2015 by historians: Edward Madigan the public historian from the Royal Holloway University of London and Graham Smith the oral historian also from the Royal Holloway. Their initial aim was to respond to the promotion of what they felt was a distorted, politically driven narrative of Britain's historical relationship with continental Europe by *Historians for Britain* and some others. Their website and blog became a discussion place on Britain's place in Europe and the wider world. Their website contains quite a few links to what is best described as articles by historians who had given a

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<sup>191</sup> Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000). p.19.

<sup>192</sup> Abulafia. (2015).

pro-European response to the debate, and in particular a response to David Abulafia's letter which I discussed in the previous section.

One of the articles which is linked to is the open letter by a group of historians in response to Abulafia's letter in *History Today*. *Fog in the Channel, Historians isolated* was published shortly after Abulafia's letter. Here the pro-European historians made their case for Britain's place in Europe and against *Historians for Britain*. The article was also linked to on the *Historians for Britain in Europe* website. It was also signed by a much larger number than the *Historians for Britain* ever managed to get signatures for. The article is worthy of further analysis, which I will do in the following paragraphs.

In the beginning of the letter the historians<sup>193</sup> point out that Abulafia's claim that, "Britain is exceptional when compared to the rest of Europe is nothing new. It dominated scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but has been overhauled in recent decades."<sup>194</sup> Although according to Daddow this has proved difficult, "pro-Europeans have found it difficult to inject a badly needed shot of uncertainty into the stories the British tell themselves about the past."<sup>195</sup> The historians who penned the counter letter, "welcome Abulafia's invitation to the debate, but say they are unconvinced by the prospective provided."<sup>196</sup> Why are the historians who penned the counter letter unconvinced by *Historians for Britain*? They argue that *Historians for Britain*'s arguments aren't anything new. Furthermore, they go further to say, "this version of Britain's past does not fit with evidence encountered in their own research, and the approach doesn't provoke debate it gives a foregone conclusion."<sup>197</sup>

The historians take issue with Abulafia's statement that:

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<sup>193</sup> Response drafted by: David Andress, Richard Blakemore, Thomas Charlton, Neil Gregor, Rachel Moss, Natalia Nowakowska, Charlotte Riley and Mark Williams. Signed by over two-hundred historians.

<sup>194</sup> Various Authors, "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated," *History Today*, 18/05/2015.

<sup>195</sup> Daddow. (2006): p.326.

<sup>196</sup> Authors, "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated."

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

Britain's 'ancient institutions' have experienced a degree of continuity unparalleled in continental Europe. Such continuity would indeed be spectacular, but it is illusory. Britain's past is neither so exalted or unique.<sup>198</sup>

These arguments are in clear disagreement to Abulafia's, but what reasons do the historians give for such a response? For parliamentary sovereignty, they argue this wasn't achieved until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And this was only after very bloody revolutions in Scotland, Ireland and England. This leads the historians to question Britain's 'uninterrupted' connection to the medieval past which Abulafia had argued. Furthermore, this didn't lead to greater democracy with universal suffrage not coming until 1928, this was later than Germany. Another point Abulafia had made was the British Common Law system was unique too. The historians who composed the letter counter argue by saying that this wasn't actually British it was English. While it is indeed peculiar it isn't the only such system in Europe. In addition to this, British law has always been influenced in practice by European legal codes, long before the European convention on human rights.<sup>199</sup>

The next issue the historians take up is something which is a very complex and a much-debated area of history. It is important to stress, on such issues, emotional responses can be triggered, historians like anyone else aren't immune to this. Abulafia had argued that anti-Semitism did not root as deeply in Britain as it did in Europe. The counter arguments by the historians who drafted the response is that, it nevertheless has a long history here. 12<sup>th</sup> century Britain, witnessed accusations of ritual murder against Jews. King Edward I also expelled Jews from his kingdom although not the only king to do this.<sup>200</sup> In short, Britain also has a dark past. They go further to argue that, "a raft of negative literary portrayals has become part of British culture, from Shakespeare and Dickens, and the Marconi scandal<sup>201</sup>,

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> The degree of anti-Semitism in the British political Marconi scandal is still disputed. This happened only a few years after the Dreyfus affair in France which remains one of the most notable examples of a miscarriage of justice and anti-Semitism. Reading closely, it would appear that the historians are saying that the Marconi scandal wasn't 'as bad' as the Dreyfus affair but pointing out that Britain does indeed have this dark tradition.



only a few years after the Dreyfus affair."<sup>202</sup> Here the historians enter a very complex area of history. Few would disagree that Britain too has a dark past, however, debating the degree of anti-Semitism seen in Britain to that seen in Europe is very complex, difficult and emotive.

The historians writing this article seem to be challenging the traditional 'Whig' interpretation of British history. To define 'Whig' history it is worth briefly looking at how historian G.M. Trevelyan approached his work. According to Richard Evans, the Trevelyan's<sup>203</sup> regarded English history, "as a progress towards liberty and democracy, fought for by men like themselves, against the entrenched forces of conservatism, authoritarianism, hierarchy and tradition."<sup>204</sup> I would argue that *Historians for Britain*, have also approached their work in the 'Whig' tradition. Moreover, I suspect they would have seen Britain getting 'a better deal' from the EU or leaving altogether as progress towards liberty and democracy. Like the Trevelyan's, fought for by men (*Historians for Britain* were mainly men) like themselves. Such historiography sets English history and, indeed, British history as a history which has followed 'a special path' and as exceptional. Historians of 'Whig' persuasion would, I would argue, see anti-Semitism as not having struck as deeply in Britain, and in seeing the British political temper as milder than its European neighbours. As they see it British history has followed 'a special path' and avoided some of the horrors seen in Europe. This historiography has been questioned, particularly in recent years. The authors of the counter response do this, particularly on the issue of anti-Semitism, and on what 'Whigs' would see as Britain's unique institutions.

### 3.5 Concluding remarks

Historians from various political schools of thought didn't hold back from letting the public know their views. They made various arguments and points in the Brexit debate, often by invoking the past. They also argued publically amongst each other. Responding to each other's blog posts, magazine and newspaper articles. At times the debate was lively, at

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<sup>202</sup> Authors, "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated."

<sup>203</sup> Here Evans is referring to Thomas Macaulay as well as G.M. Trevelyan.

<sup>204</sup> Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders : British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p.93.

times it became hostile. Some very distinct groups of historians emerged: on the Eurosceptic side *Historians for Britain* made the case usually by arguing that British history was unique and had followed 'a special path'. On the pro-European side *Historians for Britain in Europe* were the main standard bearers. Other smaller pro-European groups emerged such as *Historians for History* also emerged. They argued that British history was only understood via that of a constant interaction with its European neighbours and wasn't so unique and special. While all groups attracted supporters, it is important to remember that the vast majority of British historians didn't attach themselves to any group. British people hadn't had a say on EU membership since 1975, it is fair to say this was a once in a generation opportunity. For some historians, it was also a once in a generation opportunity to make their case. While it would seem likely that some of *Historians for Britain's* supporters and those of other groups would have held their views for much of their careers. The majority of them wouldn't have had a chance to get so involved publically, or been given the media platforms they had to express views and arguments.

## Chapter 4: Brexit 2015-2017

### 4.1 Introduction

The following chapter, will look at how the discourse in the Brexit debate, particularly from historians, developed between 2015-2017. The debate was often hostile and not just amongst politicians, the British public also argued amongst themselves as did historians. Such a polarised debate meant that historians were called upon to provide historical context. Via a number of media platforms various historians offered their arguments and versions of Britain's past.

### 4.2 Historians and Brexit

The common view of British historians in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "was that history had to be neutral as well as objective, and that taking sides was unscientific and set a bad example to students."<sup>205</sup> In a daily politics clip for the BBC aired on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015, David Abulafia argued that *Historians for Britain* wasn't trying to impose a view, they were attempting to provide a long perspective. This would indeed fit in with earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century historians, however, as time went by historians took sides in the Brexit debate. In the same program, Mary Beard stated that she liked the idea of academics getting involved in politics, she did stress that people didn't have to agree with them. Beard used her expertise on the ancient Roman empire throughout the debate. She argued in this clip, that Ancient Rome was a superstrate where citizens enjoyed basic rights from Scotland to the Sahara.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid. (2009): p.100.

<sup>206</sup> Points taken from <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-31853671/historians-david-abulafia-and-mary-beard-on-europe> , (retrieved 15/02/18).

Although at this point (March 2015), the referendum date nor the legality of it were set in stone, it was well-known that there would probably be a referendum at some point. Beard and Abulafia and other historians with varying views had already begun to make their voices and views known before any date was set. It wasn't until 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015 that the European Union referendum bill was unveiled in the Queens speech, this piece of legislation would allow the referendum to take place. On the 20<sup>th</sup> February 2016, Cameron announced that the referendum would take place on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016. Cameron, having returned from Brussels without everything he wanted from his renegotiations with EU, began making the case for Britain to remain. As I have already discussed *Historians for Britain* had already begun to do what Abulafia called offering a long perspective. They would continue to do this, whilst others such as Beard would offer very differing long perspectives to the debate.

### 4.3 Increase in discourse from historians

*Historians for Britain* had already been to the press prior to the Conservative election victory in 2015. It was as early as 2013 that *Historians for Britain* went to the press calling for what they called 'a better deal' with the EU. After Cameron called an election the debate between historians began to increase in the: media, on blogs, on TV and on radio. *Historians for Britain* were joined by other supporters in addition to those who had already signed the letter to the *Times* in 2013.

In sub-chapter 3.4.1 I discussed the *Historians for Britain* letter written by David Abulafia making the case for *Historians for Britain*, alongside a letter drafted a week later by a much larger group of historians questioning *Historians for Britain's* narrative and making a passionate pro-European case. *Historians for Britain's* letter was published less than one week after the Conservative election victory, with the counter letter coming one week later on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015. It is at this point that two very distinctive groups of historians became involved in the debate.

*Historians for Britain* were out much earlier than the pro-European historians, it wasn't until the Tory election victory that remain historians really kicked into gear. Why was this the case? Oliver Lewis made a number of points to me on this when I interviewed him. Having suspected that an EU referendum may well have been coming in 2013, Lewis, having

feared that the majority of business would be seen as wanting to remain thought the nightmare scenario would be if academia was also seen as wanting to stay. Lewis was working as research director at *Business for Britain* at the time. He thought the obvious people to target in academia were historians. His reasons for this were: first, that historians are proper academics who understand the history of the UK and its relationship with Europe. As well as a real politic argument that it would show that highly educated people were split on the issue of Britain's place in Europe.<sup>207</sup>

The reason for *Historians for Britain* coming together earlier than other groups of historians who involved themselves in the debate, is that it was very much feared that academia would almost all want to remain. Therefore, it was seen as necessary for those who were sceptical of the European project to come together early. It was suspected that they would be in the minority and would have less resources to call upon. The early start would, they hoped, ease these disadvantages. This debate between historians would continue right up until referendum day and continue on after the referendum.

The later start of *Historians for Britain in Europe* is something Andrew Knapp came to regret when he reflected on their campaign. Knapp disliked the idea that *Historians for Britain* could claim a monopoly on being 'for Britain'. He argued that this was a small right-wing group, sharing its Westminster address with (among others) the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies. By the time Knapp began to gather supporters *Historians for Britain* had already created a website which was well located on the search engines. This pushed *Historians for Britain in Europe* to create their own website. It should be brighter than *Historians for Britain's*, which Knapp described as well-designed but as gloomy as an Oxford Autumn.

It was on their website that *Historians for Britain in Europe* continued to offer their arguments. A longer version of their letter to the *Times* acted as their common statement, as well as individual statements and links to articles. Knapp points out that they didn't have the money that their opponents had, perhaps the fact that *Historians for Britain* were part of *Business for Britain* meant that they could draw on greater resources.<sup>208</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>207</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, 02/02/2018, London.

<sup>208</sup> Knapp. (2017).

*Historians for Britain in Europe* were able to offer their arguments which were picked up in the media. Some of them were even invited to Downing Street by the Chancellor George Osborne<sup>209</sup>. The fact they were given a platform by those which held the highest office in the land is arguably goes some way to make up for the lack of resources *Historians for Britain in Europe* had. Moreover, *Historians for Britain* were never invited into Downing Street, their arguments were very different to those of the majority of the British ruling class prior to the referendum.

## 4.4 Media reaction to the historical debate

Historians debating amongst themselves in the run up to one of the most important votes in British history didn't go unnoticed in the media. Various newspaper and magazine articles were published, and some historians appeared on TV and radio. Historians began to be more than historians, they filled other roles too such as political commentators. Whilst the use of history often remained important in terms of how they formulated their arguments, they went beyond the traditional role of the historian and involved themselves in politics. The media reacted to this, in the following sub-sections I will discuss these reactions and the coverage in the media.

### 4.4.1 Newspapers take sides

Not long after the two differing letters were published in *History Today*, the *Guardian* ran an editorial on the historical debate, Oliver Lewis described the article as, "a hit job on David Abulafia."<sup>210</sup> The title of the article is, the *Guardian view on Britain and Europe: never a place apart*. The *Guardian* openly backed remain throughout the debate, it is unsurprising that *Historians for Britain* and Abulafia's arguments weren't very well received in this newspaper. "Culture wars may be critical in the European referendum campaign. Historians are in the

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<sup>209</sup> George Osborne, 23/05/1971, Chancellor of the Exchequer 11/05/2010 – 13/07/2016, threatened a 'punishment' budget if Britons voted to leave the EU, resigned his position soon after losing the referendum, holds a degree in modern history from Oxford university.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, 02/02/2018, London.

front line.”<sup>211</sup> It seems from the sub-title in the article that the *Guardian* view is that historians are very important in the upcoming campaign. I will discuss some of the points the article makes in the following paragraphs.

The article was published on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015, and straight away the author states that the EU referendum will dominate politics for the immediate future. I doubt anyone would have argued with this, even at this early stage in developments (soon after the Tory election victory) it was clear what would dominate politics, and this was acknowledged in the media. The article also points out that both pro-European groups, for example, the CBI (confederation of British industry), as well as more sceptical voices, such as, *Business for Britain*, had already begun to make their cases.

The author of the article expresses belief that, “voters will be more concerned with what Britain’s place in Europe should be than with what David Cameron would achieve in his negotiations.”<sup>212</sup> It was also pointed out that in the Scottish independence referendum, the culture wars could matter as much as the political and economic ones. The editorial states that, the first spin-off of this is a group of historians that had designated themselves as *Historians for Britain*. Indeed, it was the case that *Historians for Britain* were out of the starting blocks much earlier than their pro-European counterparts.

One of the key statements in the article is, “ever since the discipline was invented, history has been a tool with which to forge identity.”<sup>213</sup> In terms of Eurosceptic historical opinion the first consideration of the Common Market is highlighted as the beginning of this strand of historical opinion. While to point out that history has been used as tool to forge identity is, indeed, true, “it is important not just to invoke the past; there must be a belief that getting the story right matters.”<sup>214</sup> British historian John Tosh used this argument when discussing Germany under the Third Reich, while the Nazi regime understood the power of the past by

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<sup>211</sup> Editorial, "The Guardian View on Britain and Europe: Never a Place Apart", *The Guardian*, 22/05/2015.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Tosh and Lang. (2006). p.2.

blaming the Jews for all disasters in German history, one must surely question their historical awareness. the *Guardian* editorial goes on to question the historical awareness of Abulafia, with particular reference to his *History Today* letter published earlier in the same month.

The *Guardian* editorial paraphrases some of Abulafia arguments in his *History Today* letter titled, *Britain: apart from or a part of Europe*. Saying that the Abulafia had:

dusted off the old interpretation of Britain's historical development as an island apart, blessed by institutions that evolved in a single uninterrupted sweep and endowed with a judge-made Common Law, distinct from the civil codes of other European nations.<sup>215</sup>

The first issue with this is the editorial claim that Abulafia has 'dusted off' this old interpretation of history. John Tosh argues that this version of Britain's past has remained, "the general theme of progress towards a pinnacle in the present day remained very popular."<sup>216</sup> Therefore, the argument that Abulafia has 'dusted off' this version of British history doesn't hold much weight.

The editorial takes issue with two of the more complex and controversial issues in the Abulafia piece. Abulafia argued that, "the British political temper has been milder than that in larger European countries."<sup>217</sup> Perhaps Abulafia's intention was to argue that Britain had avoided such major upheavals than those seen in the French Revolution and in Nazi Germany. As early as 1790, politician and writer Edmund Burke pointed out in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that:

events in England in 1688 were a unique 'act of necessity' to preserve ancient laws and liberties. He attacked events in France in 1789 as a gratuitous assault on legitimate government.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Editorial. (2015).

<sup>216</sup> Tosh and Lang. (2006). p.209.

<sup>217</sup> Abulafia. (2015).

<sup>218</sup> Tombs. (2014): p.265.



I quote Burke here as it is worthy of note that this strand of historical opinion has existed for some time, and Burke was a contemporary at time of the French revolution. Abulafia, is following on in this tradition of 'Whig' history, Burke was also a 'Whig'. Whilst arguably not as popular as it once was 'Whig' history never went away. The *Guardian* editorial states that Abulafia argued that the British are 'milder in temper' than the citizens of the continent. This a little different from what Abulafia actually said. The editorial also questions that the Abulafia had argued that anti-Semitism never struck deep roots in Britain. It goes further to describe these two arguments as "less like a history than an extract from the blurb on the back of a copy

of Our Island story<sup>219</sup>.<sup>220</sup> This statement shows clearly that the editorial thinks very little of Abulafia's arguments. Simply dismissing them as a short description on the back of a children's book.

The final paragraphs of the editorial point out that a terrible price was paid for failure of what was going on in Europe in 1930s. As well as that Britain has never been able to stand away from its neighbours for very long even at the height of empire. "Historians do a disservice to cast their country as a place apart when it can only prosper as part of a greater whole."<sup>221</sup> This is the ending sentence in *The Guardian* editorial, the article is clear in its opposition to *Historians for Britain* and is in disagreement of David Abulafia's arguments.

At the time of the editorial's publication, *Historians for Britain* weren't arguing for Britain to be cast apart. *Historians for Britain* were pro-renegotiations in the first place, they hadn't decided when they were formed that they would support a vote for Britain to leave the EU. It wasn't until they had decided that Cameron's terms were unacceptable that they decided to officially support *Vote Leave*. They used sometime over this decision and put this to a vote.

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<sup>219</sup> First published in 1905, *Our Island Story* is a children's book which covers the history of England from Roman times to the death of Queen Victoria. The author used these stories to tell her children about their homeland. To add to excitement, she used a mix of truth and myths. Former Prime Minister David Cameron described it as his favourite childhood book in 2010.

<sup>220</sup> Editorial. (2015).

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

Some of their members still preferred Britain to remain part of the EU. The decision to support vote leave wasn't made till 2016.<sup>222</sup> The outcome of this vote even led to one former unnamed *Historians for Britain* supporter to change sides. Knapp pointed this out own reflections on the campaign, "one former *Historian for Britain* left when his erstwhile companions called for a No vote and offered his support for *Historians for Britain in Europe*."<sup>223</sup> The fact that the decision wasn't made to support *Vote Leave* until 2016, calls into question the argument that, *Historians for Britain* were trying to cast their country apart at the time of the editorial's publication in 2015.

How would this negative portrayal in the national media be seen by *Historians for Britain*? I was able to discuss this with Oliver Lewis when I interviewed him in London. Lewis went as far to actually taking the *Guardian* editorial as a big compliment. This negative publicity actually generated more publicity for *Historians for Britain* and actually helped them boost their numbers in terms of supporters. Gwythian Prins didn't sign the original *Historians for Britain* letter to the *Times*, however, having seen the raft of negative publicity on *Historians for Britain* came on-board and contributed with an essay on the EU eroding Britain's global influence. As well as a number of academic posts, the vastly experienced historian has held jobs in government. Given that, *Historians for Britain* supporter numbers were much lower than their pro-European counterparts this extra support and publicity was welcomed. Lewis also pointed out, having sent copies of the essays to journalists he received a number of responses asking for hard copies to keep on their desks. Instead of facing questions on the actual essays he received questions on why historians had a role to play in any political debate, let alone one as important as the question of Britain's membership of the EU.<sup>224</sup>

Historians involved in political debate isn't in itself a new thing. 19<sup>th</sup> century British historian Sir John Seeley, who argues Daddow, ("Seeley and his peers had a more than passing influence on professional and public thinking about history"<sup>225</sup>), argued that, "the study of

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<sup>222</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018 and Email Correspondence with David Abulafia, 17/10/2017.

<sup>223</sup> Knapp. (2017).

<sup>224</sup> Points in this paragraph taken from interview with Oliver Lewis, 02/02/2018, London.

<sup>225</sup> Daddow. (2006): p.323.

history was linked to the pursuit of politics in the present."<sup>226</sup> Although the historical profession has changed markedly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is interesting that some continue on in the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century historians such as Seeley.

#### 4.4.2 Economist Bagehot column

The *Economist* is a weekly magazine- format newspaper, it takes an editorial stance of classical and economic liberalism. The Bagehot<sup>227</sup> column, is the section for weekly comment on current affairs in Britain, over the years a number of different writers have held the post. The *Economist* is known as medium where free thought is expressed. The Bagehot column has served for free thought and debate on British politics. It was in this column, where the historical side of the Brexit debate was discussed.

On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2015, the Bagehot column turned its attention to historical side of the Brexit the debate. Jeremy Cliffe, an experienced British journalist and researcher was the author of the article, *The psychology of a peninsula*. Cliffe, described *Historians for Britain* as a smaller group of historians but it had more stardust. He also briefly summarised some of *Historians for Britain's* arguments:

citing Britain's global links, its legal system and its 'milder political temper', *Historians for Britain's* argued that the country's history and traditions render it naturally separate from its European neighbours.<sup>228</sup>

Cliffe also pointed out that, "a larger group of historians countered with the argument that, Britain's fate has always been bound up with that of the continent; that in other words, the country is essentially European."<sup>229</sup> (Here Cliffe has summarised the two very different

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<sup>226</sup> Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders : British Historians and the European Continent*.(2009): p.112.

<sup>227</sup> One of the weekly columns is named after Walter Bagehot. Bagehot was a British journalist, businessman and essayist. His father in law James Wilson was the owner and the founder of the *Economist*, Bagehot served 17 years as the editor expanding its reporting on politics and influence amongst policy makers.

<sup>228</sup> Jeremy Cliffe, "The Psychology of a Peninsula," *The Economist* 25/07/2015.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

letters to *History Today* which I discussed in chapter 3. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some of the other points he raised.

Cliffe believed that Britons will have voted according to brute self-interest, but their perception of that will have been moulded by more emotional considerations. The leave side got this, *Business for Britain*, claimed that every UK household would be £933 better off every year outside the EU.<sup>230</sup> However, the Eurosceptic think-tank made much larger arguments such as Britain's otherness among European states, asserting that the country should reorient its economy and foreign policy towards colonies to which it is 'culturally and psychologically' closer than its neighbours.

Cliffe also argued that, *Historians for Britain* was spun from *Business for Britain*. Indeed, it was the case that the idea for *Historians for Britain* came from Oliver Lewis while he was working for *Business for Britain*. However, I would question the power of the argument that *Historians for Britain* was spun out of *Business for Britain*. The reasons for this are: *Historians for Britain* at least claimed to be a non-partisan group made up of historians both of right and left political persuasions, not all of *Historians for Britain* supporters actually supported leave, some, despite their scepticism at the European project actually would have preferred Britain to remain part of the EU. Therefore, the argument that *Historians for Britain* was spun out of a Eurosceptic think-tank isn't very powerful.

I have previously stated that *Historians for Britain* were out of the starting blocks much earlier than the pro-European historians. This is also highlighted in this column. In terms of funding and cross-party co-ordination the pro-Europeans also lagged behind, something which Andrew Knapp of *Historians for Britain in Europe* also alluded to. In July 2015, polls had suggested that Britons were slightly in favour of a remain vote. However, at this stage this shouldn't have been taken for granted. According to Cliffe, voters who may well have wished Britain to remain in the EU would need voter friendly facts. For example, a counter argument to *Business for Britain's* dubious claim that each household would be £933 better off a year. He added that these counter arguments needed to be rooted into what the

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

country's history and present reveal about its interests and identity.<sup>231</sup> Cliffe, stressed that there is no shortage of a material something few if any would argue with.

Cliffe goes onto to make a number of points which show he was pro-European. He pointed out that, there were about 2 million Britons living in other EU member states and around about the same number of EU nationals living in Britain. On British exceptionalism he stated, "even the most striking examples, language, legal system and the products of centuries of communion with its neighbours."<sup>232</sup> He also quoted former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher herself no Europhile, "we are European, geographically and culturally and we cannot, disassociate ourselves with Europe."<sup>233</sup> Here I think it is worth quoting the late Tony Judt one of the best-known historians of modern Europe. When discussing the appeal of the 'European Union' Judt pointed out, "that it pitted cosmopolitan modern development against old-fashioned, restrictive, and 'artificial' national constraints. This in turn may account for the special attraction of 'Europe' to the younger intelligentsia."<sup>234</sup> Perhaps this explains some of the appeal of the EU to Cliffe.

Given Cliffe's pro-European stance, what were his views on historians joining the debate? He actually welcomed both groups of historians. Bagehot, welcomed *Historians for Britain* to the debate as keenly as he did their pro-European sparring partners. This is markedly different than simply dismissing their narrative. And his reasons for this, he believed that the referendum must settle the EU question for at least a generation and, whatever the result the consequences will be momentous.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Tony Judt and Jennifer Homans, *When the Facts Change : Essays, 1995-2010* (London New York: William Heinemann Penguin Press HC, The, 2015). p.39.

<sup>235</sup> Cliffe. (2015).

Writing now with hindsight we now know the consequences of the referendum to be momentous. However, it remains unclear whether this referendum will have settled the EU issue for a generation. There are almost daily calls for second referendum, or a referendum on the terms Britain gets from the EU upon completion of negotiations by her Majesty's government. The difficult yet important question: who are we? Was raised by Cliffe at the end of the article. This question can polarise people there are no easy answers. Nevertheless, it is important to at least offer insights to this question, and here in my view, is a place where historians could offer their insights. This article was warmly received by Oliver Lewis, he thought that the sensible concerns with the EU project raised by *Historians for Britain* were picked up by the media. He believed this article was a good example of this.<sup>236</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Historians on the radio

Gwythian Prins and Margaret Macmillan<sup>237</sup> are two vastly experienced historians. They discussed a number of issues concerning Britain's place in Europe and the rest of the world in 2015, on BBC radio. Before I discuss the debate between the two historians I will briefly outline the origin of the source. I found the audio of the discussion on YouTube, I have searched on the actual BBC website for the clip but have been unable to find it. I believe the historians to have went on air on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme, sometime in 2015. The reason for this is, it is clear Nick Robinson one of the hosts of the programme is chairing the discussion. He greets the two professors' by saying good morning. As the Today programme always airs on the morning I take it to be this show. The clip-on YouTube is about 5 minutes long and during these 5 minutes I am unable to get a precise date. I believe the year to be 2015 as Prins refereed listeners to his essay *Beyond the Ghosts: Does EU membership erode Britain's global influence?* This was published on the *Historians for Britain* website and signed by the author, 2015. I will reference to the YouTube clip in my footnotes in the following paragraphs.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Email correspondence with Oliver Lewis, 18/09/2017.

<sup>237</sup> Margaret Macmillan, born 23/12/1943, Canadian historian and Professor at The University of Oxford.

<sup>238</sup> The BBC hasn't replied to any of my emails asking for the date for this source.

On opening the discussion presenter Nick Robinson says that there was a debate taking place amongst eminent historians. Robinson stated that, Prins main argument was that both Europe and Britain were haunted by ghosts, which were clouding their judgement about Britain's proper future. The ghosts according to Prins are, the long-established fear of British decline something which has marred the British elite since the Suez<sup>239</sup> crisis. British decline had begun some years previous to this "after 1945 it became clear that the British had no hope of holding onto their empire."<sup>240</sup> The Suez crisis was the first major example of Britain's lack of resources to maintain a continental presence. For the European ghost Prins claimed that it was the fear of the return of war. This caused people to argue that in some way the European Union has being the cause of the prevention of the return of war since the Second World War, Prins stressed history did not support this argument.

Robinson got Prins to offer more detail to his arguments one at a time. Taking the idea that Britain is in decline, Robinson pointed out that it has long being said that Britain has lost an empire and yet to find a role. Therefore, it has often been argued that the EU was Britain's future. Prins comes back on this saying this was the argument made 40 years in Britain's previous referendum on the then EEC membership. Prins believed at the time that that argument could have been plausible, however, Prins stated that things have moved on now. He stated that Britain was now a rising power and quoted the Foreign Office saying that Britain was a soft super power. According to Prins, Britain had better institutional links with the rest of the world than any other European country. Prins thought that we must not allow ourselves to be dominated by the what he calls the ghosts. This was the point of his essay which I mentioned in the start of his subsection. He was at this point allowed to recommend listeners to go to the *Historians for Britain* website to read his essay. The presenter was happy to add that the programme could tweet this link after the discussion was over. This is

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<sup>239</sup> British interest in Egypt stemmed directly from the importance of India. The Suez Canal could reduce journey times between the North Atlantic and northern Indian Oceans by approximately 7000 kilometres. President Nasser of Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal company in 1955. An Anglo-French force set about dealing with the troublesome Egyptian PM in 1956, initially everything went according to plan. However, the Americans were furious as what seen as an Anglo-French deception in not letting Washington know their true intentions. The British and French withdrew from the Suez Canal, the important waterway remained in Egyptian hands. The lesson for the British from this was, they lacked the resources to maintain a colonial presence. Judt.(2005): p.293-298.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. p.293.

an example of a *Historians for Britain* supporter been able to promote their arguments and essays in the national media.

After the recommendation of Prin's essay, the presenter invited Margaret Macmillan to come in on the discussion. Macmillan, stated that if Britain wasn't in decline she didn't really know what indicators would show that it was rising. Macmillan argued that Britain was once very important to Canada. She stated that this was no longer the case. There was less trade with Britain than there used to be, less immigrants from Britain and no the family ties of the past. This, alongside the special relationship with the United States being one more talked about in Britain than the United States led Macmillan to disagree with Prins on Britain being a rising power. Prins is keen to use Britain's Commonwealth links to counter Macmillan's arguments. Prins believed that, Britain was in a unique position due to The Queen being the head of the Commonwealth to revive its trading links with the Commonwealth. The future he argued, lay here as Commonwealth countries such as India were growing at a much faster rate than the EU, which was in decline.

Robinson invited Macmillan to comment on ghost two, the idea that Europeans are too obsessed with avoiding war instead of looking towards the future. Macmillan is in slight agreement with this point, pointing out that the creators of the European project were very conscious of avoiding war. However, there was now fewer and fewer who remembered the Second World War and none who remembered the First, perhaps now was the time to look ahead. Macmillan, did argue that the EU had played some part in making Europe a continent much less likely to go to war. Prins, argued that it was the Marshall Plan and NATO dominated by the Anglosphere what has kept peace and keeps Britain safe today. Given this, Prins believed there was no need to be part of the EU to be kept safe. Robinson after stating that he thought historians to be good at offering a long perspective, asked Macmillan for her thoughts on the future of the EU. Macmillan, stressed that historians are bad at predicting things. She did, however, offer her views that the EU was a project which needed to be reformed. It was a project she would be reluctant to write off. Unfortunately, the clip ends just as Prins is about to offer his final thoughts.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Points raised in this sub-section taken from discussion between Prins and Macmillan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MEjV5qmow4> (retrieved 7/03/2018).



The previous paragraphs are a reconstruction of the discussion between Prins and Macmillan in 2015. The discussion is an example of how historians responded to the Brexit debate. It is also an example of the activities and arguments they promoted. In this case the activity was an appearance on national radio where they were able to promote their arguments, and in the case of Prins promote his essay. The two historians differed very much on their views on the EU and Britain's place in the world. But was their much substance in their arguments? Had Prins argued in the tradition of 'Whig' history and of a kind of English Sonderweg? The ghosts he discussed could be something what in his view blocked this 'special path' of English history. Macmillan, on the other hand, argued that actually British history wasn't so special after all, and that Britain wasn't a leading player like Prins made out. I will discuss some of their arguments in the following paragraphs.

Prins argued that should Britain look towards the Commonwealth. He didn't see this as a trip back to the days of British empire. This on the contrary, was a move towards the future. As Prins seen it the Commonwealth countries were growing faster than the EU. The EU itself was a project in decline. Therefore, Britain should look away from the EU and towards the rest of the world. Do Prins's arguments stand-up, or on the other hand, was he just making the case for Britain to leave the EU at all costs? Economists Mark Baimbridge and Professor Philip Whyman made similar arguments in 2012.

Many Commonwealth countries offer potentially faster growing markets than other EU member states. Historic links with Commonwealth nations could give the UK a potential advantage in establishing links with these dynamic economies.<sup>242</sup>

This shows Prins arguments were shared by others, however, the important word here is could. Economists and historians aren't able to predict the future, they can offer arguments as to how they think things might turn out.

Is Britain in a state of decline? This is a difficult question but, nonetheless, an important one to attempt. What standards should we measure this decline by? Indeed, it is the case that Britain no longer has an empire where the sun never sets. But on the other hand, the Queen

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<sup>242</sup> Mark Baimbridge and Philip Whyman, *Britain, the Euro and Beyond* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). p.208.

the British head of state is also the head of the Commonwealth something which potentially puts Britain in a good position for future trade deals and alliances. The English language dominates the world stage, three British universities make the list of the world's top 10<sup>243</sup>. Britain's economy was hit hard like many others by the financial crash in 2008. However, it has recovered much better than, for example, Spain, Italy and Portugal who are also European Union members. Britain has lower rates of unemployment in comparison to many of her European neighbours and higher wages. On the other hand, wages and living standards haven't risen significantly in the UK for a number of years now. National debt stands at around 80% of GDP. These are just some of the arguments one could make to show that Britain wasn't in decline or was in decline. And, indeed, politicians, historians and many others do use them to demonstrate their respective cases. Macmillan argued that, "if Britain wasn't in decline she didn't know what demonstrated it was a nation in ascendancy."<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, there are many ways in which one could attempt to measure this. However, it is still very difficult as there are so many different arguments and measurements as to whether a nation is on the rise or on the decline.

The so called 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States is a much-debated issue. This relationship, argue those in favour of Brexit and at times those who are not will be even more important after Brexit. Potential future trade deals will be very important when Britain leaves the world's biggest single trading bloc. Whether good trade links will be achievable between Britain and Donald Trump's administration remain very much to be seen. Is this special relationship more important to Britain or the United States? Or equally as important to both parties? Again, there is no set yardstick here to answer these questions or to back up Macmillan's arguments. Indeed, it was the case that Britain joined a US led coalition in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. President George Bush even went as far as saying, "America has no truer friend than Great Britain."<sup>245</sup> But would America have gone to war without British backing? In all likelihood yes, indeed, it didn't stop America in Vietnam. "President Johnson had suggested that a token British force be sent to South Vietnam.

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<sup>243</sup> According to the Times Higher Education world university rankings.

[https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats) (Retrieved 08/03/2018).

<sup>244</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MEjV5qmow4> (Retrieved 08/03/2018).

<sup>245</sup> Text: to Bush congress address 21/09/2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1555641.stm> (Retrieved 09/03/2018).

Prime Minister Wilson refused this on the grounds that the British army was already stretched.”<sup>246</sup>. So, in the face of a terror attack on American soil it would seem highly unlikely America wouldn’t go to war without British support. In terms of trade, “by 1821 the United States took 44 per cent of its imports from Britain and only 7 per cent from France. Two centuries later, trade with North America remains a pillar of the British economy.”<sup>247</sup> Whether the relationship is special or not is difficult to say. There is without doubt a relationship between both countries. There is substance in both of the historian’s arguments. It is possible to agree and disagree with them for various reasons, some of which I have outlined here.

Prins and Macmillan made a number of arguments on BBC radio. One may well have reasons for either, agreeing or disagreeing with the arguments they made. The clip showed is that historians were very much involved in the Brexit debate. Listeners to the show may well have been inspired to do further research into the arguments made. Or, it may have added some weight into what people already thought about Britain’s place in the world and on the upcoming EU referendum. Given their positions as historians perhaps some will have seen them as an authority on matters of the past. This authority, may well have been welcomed on such a complex issue the Britain’s place in Europe and the rest of the world is.

## 4.5 Concluding remarks

Historians were active participants in the debate that raged prior to the Brexit referendum. They did so personally and as members of their respective groups. The two most active groups of historians in the run-up to the referendum were *Historians for Britain* and *Historians for Britain in Europe*. There was little love lost between the two. Both made passionate arguments, applying their knowledge of Britain’s past to the question, should Britain remain or opt to leave the European Union. Printed articles, radio appearances, TV appearances are some examples of the activities historians took part in to promote their arguments. This was alongside their websites, were links to articles and statements from supporters were available freely for everyone. Historians involvement also had an effect on

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<sup>246</sup> Sylvia Ellis, "Britain at War over Vietnam " *BBC History Magazine* 2015.

<sup>247</sup> Tombs. (2014): p.363.

the Brexit debate itself. As discussed in this chapter, the *Guardian* ran an editorial on historian's involvement, the *Economist* discussed their involvement in one of their famous columns and BBC Radio 4 gave historians air time to promote their arguments on their flagship news program. These are examples of the platforms historians had to offer their arguments. Historian's arguments in the Brexit debate gave the debate at large a different dynamic. They weren't coming with, for example, a mass of statistics claiming to show Britons would be better or worse off depending on the result, this is something *Vote Leave* and the *Remain Campaign* both did, some which have since been proved to be dubious. On the contrary, historians used their analyses of Britain's past to argue both for *Leave* and *Remain* and to add much needed context. With so many dubious facts and fake news, historian's arguments, I would argue, gave the debate a much-welcomed extra dynamic.

## Chapter 5: Aftermath

### 5.1 Introduction

By the time summer came in 2016, the referendum was over as was David Cameron's time at 10 Downing Street. However, the debate on Brexit was far from over – it had just begun. The following chapter will discuss the aftermath of the Brexit vote, with particular emphasis on the historians and constellations of historians discussed in the previous chapter. What happened to these historians? Did they continue their engagement? Did they change sides and if so, why? Did new historians and formations emerge – if so, who were they and which arguments did they bring to the debate?

### 5.2 Historians and Brexit: An opportunity missed?

In July 2016, and indeed the immediate wake of the political earthquake of the Brexit vote the editor of *History Today* magazine Paul Lay used his editorial to offer his account of the role played by historians in the run-up to the referendum. Lay, himself a remain voter was critical to both sides arguing, “a more nuanced conversation among historians of multiple perspectives and specialisations would have been a good thing and might have led to a higher level of public debate.”<sup>248</sup> As we have seen a number of historians did make the case for leave, however, they were in the minority. Lay argued those who made the case for leave were mainly all well-established men, close to retirement age or already retired who had nothing to lose by going public with their views. In some cases, their Eurosceptic views were already well-known, for instance, Andrew Roberts who has been described as the, “leading Eurosceptic historian.”<sup>249</sup> Looking at the demographic profile of *Historians for Britain*, it is easy to understand Lays argument as the constraints of time, money and career prospects would most likely not concern most of the supporters of *Historians for Britain*, in the same way it would younger colleagues.

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<sup>248</sup> Paul Lay, "Historians and Brexit: An Opportunity Missed?," *History Today*, 11/07/2016.

<sup>249</sup> William Cash, "The Deep History of Brexit," *The Times* 07/08/2016.

When I interviewed Paul Lay, he went further to say that, “what was interesting was that those historians who backed leave were often much more cosmopolitan than those who backed remain.”<sup>250</sup> This is a highly interesting observation, yet Lay did not define cosmopolitan which can have various meanings, including research subjects. David Abulafia’s has offered the following reasoning behind devoting himself to the history of Spain and Italy: “I like warm, sunny places with good food, handsome buildings, fine vistas and cheerful inhabitants.”<sup>251</sup> It could also be argued that this says something about class. Some may see the pursuit of history in warmer climates as something which the elites and upper-classes take part in. Perhaps this made it difficult for *Historians for Britain* to engage with the British public, they were arguably too elitist. To historians’ counterfactuals tend to come with health-warnings as they factor out actors or events in the past. Here, there is at least ground for a counterfactual speculation, if the leave vote hadn’t happened, would this have been because of, or despite, the involvement of *Historians for Britain*?

Lay, also discussed historians who had supported the remain campaign. A number of distinguished historians just prior to the referendum, assembled themselves in Downing Street in support of remain campaign at the invitation of George Osborne. A number of them, “have since expressed regret at becoming so close to a government they were hardly enamoured with.”<sup>252</sup> A letter in the *Guardian* soon followed. In the letter, over 300 historians said, “a vote to leave the EU would condemn Britain to irrelevance.”<sup>253</sup> The list of signatories included, Niall Ferguson and Simon Schama both familiar to the public through their television documentaries and popular books. One might have expected Ferguson an arch Thatcherite to have been on the other side. Oliver Lewis attempted to contact him on a number of occasions in an attempt to gain his support for *Historians for Britain*.<sup>254</sup> Ferguson, didn’t respond, and eventually came out to publically back remain and then some months after the referendum changed his mind and said he was wrong. Lay when discussing the

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<sup>250</sup> Interview with Paul Lay, 07/04/2017, London.

<sup>251</sup> Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders : British Historians and the European Continent*. (2009): p.184.

<sup>252</sup> Lay. (2016).

<sup>253</sup> Heather Stewart, "Vote to Leave Eu Would 'Condemn Britain to Irrelevance', Say Historians," *The Guardian* 25/05/2016.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Oliver Lewis, London, 02/02/2018.

historians visiting Downing Street argued that, “historians should speak *truth* to power, not for it.”<sup>255</sup>

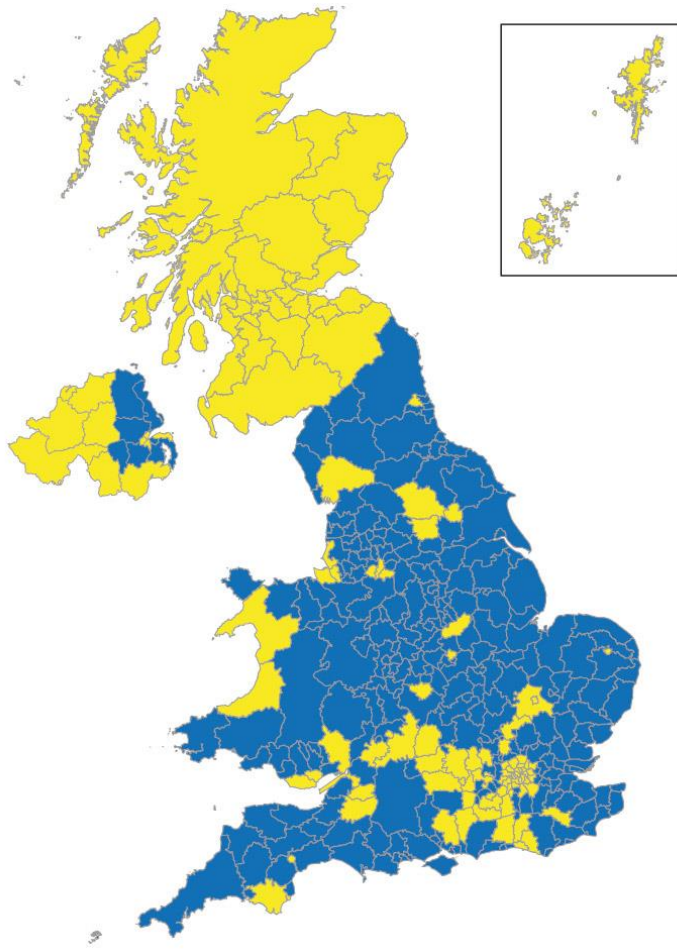
Was then Brexit an opportunity missed for historians? According to Lay this was very much the case. Historians could have engaged with the public a lot more. The vast majority of them didn’t engage at all. While 300 signatories on one letter to the public may seem like a lot of historians. There are many more historians in Britain who didn’t sign, or show in anyway support for *Historians for Britain*, or any other groups of historians. To illustrate his point, Lay, pointed out that most of the larger university towns voted remain by quite large margins. He also had a map attached to his *History Today* editorial, colour coded to which areas voted leave and which voted remain. It is clear from the map that: London, Cambridge, Oxford and Newcastle<sup>256</sup> were remain areas. This, according to Lay, shows the failure of academics based in Cambridge, Oxford and London to engage with anyone outside these areas.<sup>257</sup> True, the voting pattern of these areas are clear, but there could be a variety of reasons for the clear remain vote in these areas. I would also note that during the interview, it became clear that Lay distanced himself from the academic environment of Oxbridge and Cambridge. Stating how they came from different worlds, (which in Britain tends to mean different classes).

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<sup>255</sup> Lay. (2016).

<sup>256</sup> Areas close to Newcastle voted leave, however, Newcastle central voted remain an area with two universities.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid



Source: <https://www.historytoday.com/paul-lay/historians-and-brexite-opportunity-missed> (retrieved 22/05/2018). Parts in Yellow voted remain, parts in blue leave.

### 5.2.1 Niall Ferguson and Brexit

As of 2018, Ferguson holds positions at Cambridge and the Hoover Institution, Stanford. In addition to his academic posts he is a political commentator and journalist. One can be fairly sure that Lay and others would describe him as a well-established man. One doesn't have to go too far back to see examples of Ferguson's Euroscepticism. For instance, in a 2015 article published in *Prospect*

(a British monthly general interest magazine) Ferguson argued, "Europe is not quite stagnating, but it certainly isn't growing dynamically. It is failing to create jobs especially for the young and immigrants. In the EU, bureaucrats like nothing better than to draw up



complicated regulations and impose them on the rest of us."<sup>258</sup> Here Ferguson shows he is no Europhile, yet prior to the referendum he was one of the most outspoken remain supporters. Ferguson is friends with David Cameron and George Osborne, reflecting on giving them support afterwards Ferguson has stated that, "he was wrong on Brexit, he had wanted to keep his friends in Number 10 and 11."<sup>259</sup> Could Ferguson's position have as much to do with supporting friends as about Brexit itself? His position is difficult to pin-point, but what is true is Ferguson enjoys the limelight and publicity. In supporting the two most powerful men in Britain he certainly gained some of this.

Jack Doyle, the political editor of the *Daily Mail* has combined some of Ferguson's statements pre-referendum into one article. According to Doyle, Ferguson is an eminent historian who largely came forward as the intellectual champion of the remain camp. Some of Ferguson's interesting statements include, 'it is the proponents of Brexit who are the utopians. Far from been Eurosceptics, they are Anglo-loonies.' 'History shows that when Britain disengages from the continent, the continent goes to hell in a handcart. The notion that we can sail off to the Atlantic and drop our anchor close to Bermuda is absurd.'<sup>260</sup> These are just some of Ferguson's public statements pre-referendum. He doesn't hold back when making his case, and uses the various media platforms available to him to make his arguments.

So why then just a few months after the referendum did he perform an astonishing U-turn? In a *Boston Globe* article Ferguson offers his own account. Firstly, he admits he was "a staunch Thatcherite. As well as a proud Eurosceptic."<sup>261</sup> He goes further in the article to explain his reasons for his change of stance. "He had convinced himself that the costs of Brexit would outweigh the benefits. But most importantly he admitted the biggest factor was his personal friendship with Cameron and Osborne. Ferguson said, he even wrote things

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<sup>258</sup> Niall Ferguson, "The Degeneration of Europe," *Prospect Magazine*, 15/10/2015.

<sup>259</sup> "I Was Wrong on Brexit," *The Boston Globe*, 12/12/2016.

<sup>260</sup> Jack Doyle, "'I Was Wrong About Brexit!' Britain's Most Influential Historian Niall Ferguson Says He Made a Mistake in Backing the Remain Campaign and Says the Eu 'Deserved' the Result," *The Daily Mail*, 06/12/2016.

<sup>261</sup> Ferguson, "I Was Wrong on Brexit."

which he in fact doubted a first in his career he claimed. He claimed to have done this to try and keep his friends in power, something he later thought was wrong and sorry for.”<sup>262</sup>

In October 2017, Ferguson published his book, *The square and the tower. Networks, hierarchies and the struggles for global power*. As discussed previously, some interesting networks of historians emerged in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. Although Ferguson, didn't devote much of this book to his views on Brexit, he does make some notable observations, including, describing “Dominic Cummings<sup>263</sup> as the architect of the ‘Vote Leave’ victory.”<sup>264</sup>. Ferguson, points out that the odds were stacked against leave, due to their limited budget (£10m) and limited time (ten months). Nonetheless, *Vote Leave* was able to win a narrow victory. Cummings argued, that one of the keys to victory were nearly a billion targeted digital adverts.<sup>265</sup> Cummings himself has expressed:

the importance of the hard work done by others such as, Oliver Lewis. Although the hard work done by Lewis and others was unknown outside the office, they made extreme efforts and ran rings round so called ‘experts’.<sup>266</sup>

Ferguson, summarises his argument as to how Brexit was won as, “Brexit, was a victory for a network – and network science – over the hierarchy of the British establishment.”<sup>267</sup> As I have pointed out, Ferguson preferred to have his place in the British establishment than to join the smaller network of *Historians for Britain*. Hindsight, is indeed a great thing and Ferguson writes with hindsight now on Brexit. Fergusons change of stance shows no matter how far up the academic hierarchy one is (or at least sees himself as being), it is possible for one to change their stance.

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Dominic Cummings, born November 1971, former campaign director for *Vote Leave*.

<sup>264</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower : Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power* (Uk: Allen Lane, 2017). p.382.

<sup>265</sup> Ferguson. (2017): p.382.

<sup>266</sup> Dominic Cummings, "How the Brexit Referendum Was Won," *The Spectator*, 09/01/2017.

<sup>267</sup> Ferguson. (2017): p.383.

## 5.3 Historians after the Brexit referendum

What did the supporters of *Historians for Britain* and other groups do after the referendum? In the case of *Historians for Britain*, one could argue that their job was done, the British people voted leave on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016. Maybe this is why their website was taken down. However, the Brexit debate has raged on since June 2016. There are many different arguments as to how, and on what terms Britain should leave the EU.

As to reasons why historians should still be involved, it is worth looking at one of A.C. Grayling's<sup>268</sup> Tweets, where attempts to make the case for Brexit to be stopped. "Brexit is the First World War all over again: a stupid, destructive utterly unnecessary waste. Led by donkeys. But this time we the people will stop it."<sup>269</sup> This is just one example of many tweets by Grayling, and, others with similar views on Brexit, arguing for Brexit to be stopped. Such arguments, and general negativity in the British media about Brexit particularly from the BBC have led to the formation of new web platform, called *Briefings for Brexit*.

*Briefings for Brexit* is a digital think-tank with support from a wide range of professions of which historian is one. Their supporters regularly publish essays on the website as well as in the national media. In addition to this, some of their supporters have made a number of TV and radio appearances. In the 'our mission' section of the website they argue that, "there is a prevailing media view that all sensible and informed people oppose Brexit. Even going as far to associate support for Brexit with low levels of education and intellect."<sup>270</sup> Historians and other academics are contributing daily to *Briefings for Brexit*. It is here where some of the previous supporters of *Historians for Britain* are making their case, and arguing for the decision of the British people, "to be fully and positively carried out."<sup>271</sup> They also argue that Brexit can actually be a very positive thing, for Britain and its people.

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<sup>268</sup> A.C. Grayling, born 03/04/1949, British philosopher and author.

<sup>269</sup> A C Grayling, Tweet, 09/03/2018. Grayling has almost 60000 followers on Twitter, and he probably reaches a much larger audience given that is Tweets will be re-Tweeted by many others. <https://twitter.com/acgrayling/status/971329248144261120> (Retrieved, 20/3/2018).

<sup>270</sup> <https://briefingsforbrexit.com/our-mission/> (Retrieved, 20/03/2018).

<sup>271</sup> Ibid

### 5.3.1 Briefings for Brexit

There are nine historians among the contributors of *Briefings for Brexit*. Andrew Roberts, David Abulafia and Robert Tombs are the three of the nine whom had previous affiliation with *Historians for Britain*. Tombs also serves as one of the editors for *Briefings for Brexit*. Tombs most recent book was published in 2014, *The English and their History*, encompasses nearly 1000 pages and covers English history from 600BC up until 2014. The majority of Tombs previous publications in his long career have mainly been on French history. Some scholars may argue that, having studied other regions Tombs may have a good vantage point to study the country where he comes from. Moreover, this has allowed Tombs to apply both an insider's and outsider's perspective as well as a comparative dimension. On the other hand, some may argue why is a scholar who has specialised in French history now the spokesperson for *Briefings for Brexit*.

It appears to be Tombs who is the standard bearer amongst the historians who contribute to *Briefings for Brexit*. He has appeared on TV and radio making the case for Brexit to be carried through, as well as regularly publishing articles on their website and in the media. In an email correspondence, I had with Tombs in October 2017 he stated then his position was, "that the decision has been taken, and must be carried through vigorously."<sup>272</sup> They want to show that there is no united view amongst the establishment, which is loosely defined as, "a network of vested interests, which every government are obliged to respect"<sup>273</sup> on Brexit. Some highly educated and influence people in their view, do wish for the vote of the British people to be carried through.

What then is the importance of historians in this group? Are they, for example, bringing something to the debate on the terms of Brexit, acting as a kind of authority against those that want to hamper or even stop Brexit? Perhaps it is more difficult now for historians to offer historical arguments to the debate. The decision has been taken and the debate on the terms of Britain's exit is very current. It seems difficult to find a historical analogy for leaving

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<sup>272</sup> Email correspondence with, Robert Tombs, 13/10/2017.

<sup>273</sup> Scruton. (2000): p.194.

the EU, as no country other than Greenland has actually left. Pro-European politicians such as Nick Clegg have found themselves compared to Vidkun Quisling the Norwegian Nazi puppet.<sup>274</sup> Such historical anachronisms, spurred on by Brexit add weight to the argument that historians should be contributing to the debate.

In a Tombs blog piece, *Brexit suggests we're on the right side of history* published in late 2017, Tombs places the Brexit process in a larger historical frame. Tombs, uses examples from the past and applies them to the current problems of Brexit being carried through. Firstly, he opens the blog with, "history often helps us to see our problems in proportion."<sup>275</sup> He argues, "never in modern times has there been such an overt and even contemptuous attempt to deny the legitimacy of a popular vote."<sup>276</sup> This is an argument where the distinction between a political and academic argument at best can be described as blurry.

Tombs goes further to bring in a number of examples from history. Indeed, some British politicians may also do this given that a large number of them studied history. For instance, the highly pro-Brexit MP Jacob Rees Mogg<sup>277</sup>, is well-known for deploying historical arguments. Tombs, quotes Edmund Burke, British Prime Minister William Gladstone and French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville. All of these historical figures argued at some point that it is important that the will of the people is respected. As a historian, Tombs, uses quotes from historical figures in this piece to argue that the will of the British people should be respected on Brexit. While Rees Mogg, and other MPs are also capable of doing the same, they do so in their capacity as politicians. It has been highlighted part of the reason for the British people voting Brexit was because of distrust in politics and politicians. Perhaps

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<sup>274</sup> Paul Lay, "The Golden Age of Anachronism:

the Relentless Scramble for Dubious Parallels Reveals Worrying Levels of Historical Illiteracy.

," *History Today*, 17/09/2016.

<sup>275</sup> Robert Tombs to Briefings for Brexit, 2017.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Jacob Rees Mogg, born 24/05/1969, Conservative MP for North East Somerset, well known for his Eurosceptic views, chair of the European Research Group a Eurosceptic pressure group within the Conservative Party, studied history at Oxford.

historian's arguments will be better received by the public than those politicians make, but it is hard to know this further without in-depth studies.

Another notable observation in the article is on the issue of Brexit and identity. Again, Tombs draws on quotes from the past to formulate his arguments. For instance, English novelist George Orwell once said in his famous essay, *The Lion and the Unicorn*<sup>278</sup>, "The English intelligentsia are Europeanized. England is perhaps the only country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality."<sup>279</sup> In this light, Tombs says he feels an odd sense of déjà-vu when listening to remainers unquestionably supporting the EU commission. Another relevant Orwell quote from the same essay is, "the English intelligentsia take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow."<sup>280</sup> Tombs also uses these quotes from Orwell in his blog piece. As Tombs sees it, those influential people who want Britain to remain in the EU will give their support to the EU at all costs.

Tombs also discusses what he sees as the 'revulsion' of British history from some of British societies greatest institutions (including the BBC and The Guardian). As Tombs sees it there is a revulsion against:

the internalised caricature of British history: imperialism, exploitation, oppression. We rarely know enough to form a more balanced picture: few advanced countries teach their children less history than we do.<sup>281</sup>

Tombs and his colleagues, on the contrary, continue to discuss, what they see as, the unique nature of British history. They deploy this version of history to argue for Brexit to be carried out, and that it could be a very positive thing for Britain.

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<sup>278</sup> In this paragraph, I have taken quotations from the first part of the essay which is titled '*England your England*'. Orwell, in this essay expressed his opinions on the outdated English class system and the need for a socialist revolution.

<sup>279</sup> George Orwell, *George Orwell : Essays* (London: Penguin Books in association with Secker & Warburg, 2000, 1984). p.155.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. p.155.

<sup>281</sup> Tombs. (2017).

## 5.4 Relations between historians after the referendum

The debate about Brexit and its implications has already had a profound impact on British society, and the academics who work there. One thing that is clear, is that the majority of historians who went public with their views would have preferred Britain to remain in the EU. What then of those historians whom preferred Britain to leave and voted to do so or came to that position after the referendum? “Concerns have been expressed for those academics mainly in fairly junior positions who express views which favour Brexit. It is believed, that a considerable number of scholars are concerned for their careers if they express such views.”<sup>282</sup> *Briefings for Brexit*, have stated that they are, “sorry colleagues feel this way and believe they are right to be worried.”<sup>283</sup>

It is interesting that in a country and, its universities which pride itself on free speech has come to such a situation where people are afraid to come forward and express their views. How did it come to this? This is a complex question to answer, but an important one to attempt.

Turning back to *Historians for Britain* as we have seen their list of supporters was made up of well-established older historians who were predominately male. One could argue that, those older historians who supported *Historians for Britain* had nothing to lose in terms of their careers. Moreover, their Eurosceptic views were often already known to the public so it wouldn't make much difference that they were so publically in favour of Brexit for their careers. The best example here is Andrew Roberts, who as I mentioned earlier in this thesis has been described as the leading Eurosceptic historian. Has such a group really done any favours to those less established historians who perhaps shared their Eurosceptic views? Would a junior Eurosceptic academic with a lesser known university in the UK really have wanted to show their support for *Historians for Britain*? In a debate where the majority of the

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<sup>282</sup> Robert Tombs and Graham Gudgin to Brexit Central, 17/02/2018, 2018.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

media, political class and establishment wanted to stay it was difficult and, indeed, still is difficult for academics to express Eurosceptic views.

So far in this chapter, I have mainly discussed Eurosceptic historians, some of the historians who campaigned for Britain to remain have continued to make their voices known after the referendum. They didn't get the result they wanted from the referendum. Yet some of them continue to speak out mainly on what terms Britain leaves the EU on or some even go as far as wanting to stop Brexit. One of these scholars is Tanja Buelmann<sup>284</sup>. Buelmann, is a German historian who has lived in England for a number of years, and who has continued to make a passionate case for remain. Buelmann uses her Twitter account to post something she calls 'Tanjias' daily. Here, she publishes daily thoughts and ideas often in video format on the state of the Brexit process as she sees it. She has also had a number of articles published in newspapers and magazines where she also makes a passionate European case. Buelmann sees herself as an EU citizen living in Britain, for her Brexit is very much an emotional issue. Her article in the *Times Higher Education* magazine, *Anti-Brexit historians must dare to be political*, was published in March 2018. The article offers some points on the role of the historian – and could potentially shed some light onto the relationships between historians. These points, and their implications will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, Buelmann's own views are very clear in the article. She wants anti-Brexit historians to be political. "Historians must not let Boris Johnson<sup>285</sup> and other armchair scholars take centre stage in their discipline."<sup>286</sup> Further into the article, Buelmann raises the point that:

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<sup>284</sup> Tanja Buelmann, born in Germany, scholar who specialises in the history of Migration and Dispora, Faculty Associate Pro- Vice-Chancellor at the University of Nortumbria, arguably the most active pro-European and remain historian after the refredum.

<sup>285</sup> Boris Johnson, born 19/06/1964, British politician, historian and journalist, Johnson was one of the most senior politicians to back Brexit, was one of the leading contenders to succeed David Cameron.

<sup>286</sup> Tanja Buelmann, "Anti-Brexit Historians Must Dare to Be Political " *The Times Higher Education*, 02/03/2018.



history is frequently employed by those who wish to serve their own ideology or their own interests, they use history to establish a particular narrative to facilitate an anti-EU argument or invoke nostalgia for a glorious imperial past that never existed.<sup>287</sup>

Here it is clear she is taking a stand against those who backed and continue to back Brexit. It is true, that memories of Britain's 'glorious' past as some see it were used throughout the Brexit debate. Bueltmann goes further to say, "while history is frequently used, historians themselves- academics and experts more broadly – are derided and dismissed."<sup>288</sup> This counter's some of the things I have found out in this project, historians were given a platform in the media, radio and TV both before and after the referendum. Perhaps Bueltmann is referring to more recent developments, with pro-EU historians and other pro-Europeans finding themselves increasingly side-lined as Brexit draws ever closer.

Earlier in this thesis I pointed out that some academics have found it difficult to express that they voted Brexit or are sceptical of the European project. Which brings me to an important point Bueltmann made, "judges, MPs, the civil service and essentially anyone who questions anything about Brexit are attacked as traitors."<sup>289</sup> Has the Brexit debate now gone full circle? Bueltmann, uses strong language to illustrate her point. But similar language has also been used by the British media, to attack MPs who voted to block some of the Brexit bills which need to be passed through parliament so Britain can leave the EU. The *Daily Telegraph* called the rebellious MPs mutineers and the *Mail* traitors. The Brexit debate has become very toxic indeed.

Where then does this leave historians? I would argue, that the relationships between those that continue to involve themselves in the Brexit debate won't be very cordial. One doesn't have to look far on Twitter to see some of the negative comments such outspoken historians as Bueltmann and Robert Tombs receive. Bueltmann, at times has even taken a break from Twitter and campaigning due to the large amount of abusive emails and Tweets she has received. Historians turning political comes at a cost. A simple search of their name will bring

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

up a number examples, although most seem to be from Twitter trolls and not from other historians. Bueltmann ends her piece by saying, “this is a climate in which historians can provide much needed context and interpretation.”<sup>290</sup> While those historians at *Briefings for Brexit* will disagree with a number of Bueltmann’s arguments, they are likely to be in full agreement with her here. Perhaps if other historians and the public can value each other’s opinions, and bear in mind that context is important in this political climate, a more nuanced debate may be possible.

## 5.5 Concluding remarks

As the British government attempts to negotiate Britain’s exit from the European Union, the debate between historians continues. Leaving the European Union is proving more problematic and complicated than anyone ever predicted. In fact, it was rumoured the government actually made no plans for a leave victory. David Cameron and George Osborne resigned their positions very soon after the referendum. Theresa May attempted to bring more strength and stability into government by calling a snap general election. However, this backfired and led to the government becoming even weaker than it already was.

As for the historians, we have met earlier in this thesis, a number continue to offer views and thoughts as to how the Brexit referendum result will shape Britain in years to come. However, their names and communication platforms have changed. For instance, *Briefings for Brexit* is the group some Eurosceptic historians have attached themselves too, and *Academics for Europe* is the group where pro-European historians have aligned too. The activities historians take part in are by and large the same, written articles, radio and TV appearances, podcasts, blogs and seminars are used to promote their arguments.

Historians can offer a different perspective than politicians, whom have been out of favour with the British public for some time. As I have discussed in this chapter some do very much that. Historians can also fulfil different roles. Two examples of this are Robert Tombs serving as editor for *Briefings for Brexit*, and Tanja Bueltmann who as well as holding a position at

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

the University of Northumbria is very active as an anti-Brexit activist. Unlike Tombs and some of the other historians who involve and involved themselves in the Brexit debate Buelmann isn't retired. Nonetheless, Buelmann travels Britain to campaign against Brexit. I would expect the Brexit debate to go on for some years to come, even after Britain leaves I would expect some will continue to call for another referendum, better trade deals and many other things. Historians will continue to take part in the debate, and as some of them have already found out, going over into to political activism and commentary can come at a price.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Brexit referendum led to the formation of a number of groups of historians. The two main actors in this thesis, *Historians for Britain* and *Historians for Britain in Europe* were two such groups. Both parties, used a variety of platforms to involve themselves in the debate. These included, newspapers, magazines, podcasts, radio and TV appearances as well as blogs. These scholars launched themselves into the debate on the basis of being academic authorities in their respective fields. Interestingly, these fields did not necessarily have to do with the relationship between Britain and Europe – being a historian seems to have been sufficient qualification in itself. What unified both groups were their shared understanding of the past and the firm belief that this understanding ought to have ramifications /implications for political choices made today.

*Historians for Britain in Europe*, made the argument that Britain's past was only understood as a part of a larger whole. Britain, they argued, has engaged with her European neighbours for centuries. Their argument was this path needed to be continued and they created a vision how a leave vote would cast Britain adrift. Hence, stability would be replaced by chaos and uncertainty. *Historians for Britain* on the other hand, argued that Britain's history and in particular that of England was unique and different from her European counterparts. In this thesis, I used the term Sonderweg when discussing *Historians for Britain's* understanding of the past. In their view, the consequence of acknowledging that English history followed a special path, was that Britain needed to leave the EU in order to reconnect and continue down the lane she is destined for.

Turning back to my research question: Did historians have any effect on the Brexit debate as well as the communities of British historians it involved? I would argue historians provided much needed context to the debate. It wasn't just economic concerns people went to the ballot box with on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. 2016. The issue of identity was also of importance. This is an area, I would argue, where historians can provide important insights, so people better understand identity, their history and where they came from. This wasn't something the official *Leave* and *Remain* campaigns offered. At least not in the depth some of the historians I have discussed did. Historians involvement in the debate had a twofold effect, context and ideas towards the complex question of who the people on the Isles called Britain are, (British, European, English, Scottish, Welsh). These aren't easy questions, but being

historians, who are used to working with difficult questions without any clear answers they at least offered some ideas. These ideas and arguments were picked up in the British media prior to the referendum. Historians continue to provide context to the ongoing Brexit debate, which I would argue is welcome, given the, complex situation Britain finds itself in after the referendum.

The two groups of historians disagreed markedly on their versions of Britain's past. This was also picked up by the British media. For instance, *History Today* publishing two letters from the different groups as well as the *Financial Times* column I discussed in chapter 1, where some of the arguments the groups made were discussed. This I would argue effected the Brexit debate. It showed that it wasn't just politicians who could make the case for *Leave* or *Remain*. Historians were capable of making the case also, and like politicians they could disagree and offer counter arguments to each other. They were able to affect the debate by writing in newspapers and magazines, contributing to their groups website and some were invited onto TV and radio to make their arguments. Some *Remain* supporting historians were even invited to Downing Street in support of the Chancellor who was campaigning for *Remain*. Across Britain many people campaigned for remain, yet few were invited into Downing Street. This shows that historians were very much important actors in the Brexit debate.

Those that involved themselves so publically in the Brexit debate have found out this can come at a price. As I have pointed out in chapter 5, one doesn't have to look far on Twitter to see the online abuse some historians receive. Through my own research I have found out that those historians who may/have supported Brexit have found themselves on the side-lines. The prevailing view in British academia is in favour of Britain remaining part of the EU. It is also shown in terms of supporters of the two groups I have discussed, *Historians for Britain* wasn't able to attract many supporters. *Briefings for Brexit*, was created with the aim of showing that not all academia supports remain, and they are many positive reasons, in their view, for Brexit.

As I write, August 2018, the Brexit situation remains a very polarised one. I would argue that it isn't just Brexit supporting historians who now suffer abuse. Those that choose to campaign for a, second referendum or, a 'peoples vote' a vote on the terms of Brexit also find themselves under the cosh. In terms of Brexit effecting relationships between historians I would say it has put them under strain. This is an area where further research could be done. As the situation is very fluid and has changed a lot since I began my research, it is

worth looking into further Perhaps this is best done in 2019 when Britain is supposed to leave the EU. Although this could also change, such is the nature of Brexit.

If further research was to be carried out, I would suggest that more interviews were conducted, with historians from both sides as well as those who didn't take part at all. This in itself isn't easy, I found that out while working on this project. I didn't hear back from everyone I contacted, and being based in Norway it wasn't always easy to go to the UK to carry out research. Nonetheless, I would argue that this isn't only an interesting area of research but also a very important one. It would be interesting to get a variety of historian's views on the Brexit debate as well as their roles in it, if they played one. Important as I think it should be known or at least have some insights as to why Brexit supporting historians found themselves on the side-lines. Why do historians find themselves on the wrong end of abuse for being outspoken? Again, there are no easy answers but it is important, in my view, to have some insights as to why this is the case. Historians can add much needed context into future political debates. Therefore, the fact some felt they couldn't get involved in the Brexit debate because their views went against the majority should be subject to further research.

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### Brief timeline of events

- 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013: *Historians for Britain* letter published in the *Times*, a British national daily calling for 'a better deal' with the EU. Twenty-two academics signed this letter. By the time of the referendum *Historians for Britain* had forty-five supporters.
- 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015: Mary Beard and David Abulafia appear on the BBC's *Daily Politics* show. Both discuss what historians have to say about the UK's past and present relationship with its closet neighbours.
- 11<sup>th</sup> May 2015: David Abulafia has letter published in *History Today* where he sets out the case for *Historians for Britain*. *Britain: apart from or apart from Europe? The 'Historians for Britain' campaign believes Britain's unique history sets it apart from the rest of Europe*. This letter caused controversy and it wasn't long until other academics responded.
- 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015: Various historians sign a counter letter to David Abulafia's. The counter letter was also published in *History Today*. *Fog in the Channel, Historians Isolated*. Over three-hundred historians signed this letter, it called into question the arguments Abulafia had made one week earlier. This letter was also published on *Academics for Britain in Europe* website.
- 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015: The *Guardian* a British national daily newspaper ran an editorial on historians in the Brexit debate.
- 25<sup>th</sup> July 2015: The *Economist* a weekly magazine-format newspaper ran a column on historian's involvement in the Brexit debate.
- 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016: Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. *Leave* won but the margin was small 51.9% of voters voted *Leave* with 48.1% voting *Remain*.
- Unsure of the precise dates but sometime in late 2017 and into 2018. The original website of *Historians for Britain* was taken down as well as *Academics for Britain in Europe*. Some *Historians for Britain* became supporters of *Briefings for Brexit*. This is a group of academics who make the case for Brexit to be carried through vigorously. *Academics for Britain in Europe* have a new website (*Academics for Europe*). The group continues to make a passionate pro-European case. Their hope is that Britain's future relationship with the EU is as close as possible or that Brexit is somehow reversed.





## **Taken from the first page of the Historians for Britain website.**

Their original web address has now been bought by someone else.

*Historians for Britain* is an independent, non-partisan group established by *Business for Britain*, to represent the historians and academics who believe in a renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the European Union, backed up by an In/Out referendum. The group was founded in July 2013 when twenty-two of Britain's leading historians wrote to the *Times* to throw their support behind the campaign for a renegotiation of Britain's EU membership. Signatories included Professor David Abulafia, Lord Lexden and Professor Robert Tombs. *Historians for Britain* aims to achieve its objectives via quality research and set-piece seminars and lectures, which will demonstrate that leading historical thinkers have serious reservations about Britain's current relationship with the EU and want a better deal for our country. Members of the *Historians for Britain* Board include:

- **Professor David Abulafia (Chairman)** – Professor of Mediterranean History, Cambridge University
- **Dr Sheila Lawlor** – Director, Politeia
- **Dr Andrew Roberts** – Author and historian
- **Dr David Starkey** – Honorary fellow, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University

## Extract from Oliver Lewis essay, *Lessons from the 1975 EU renegotiation*. (Refers to footnotes 163-167).

### Foreword



Oliver Lewis' fascinating account of the attempt to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the Common Market, or EEC, is both a well-researched piece of history and an essay that makes one sit up and think about current discussions concerning Britain's place in what is now known as the European Union. We can see similar splits within the two major political parties, though in 1975 Labour was more deeply divided than the Conservatives and now it is probably the other way around, though under the present leader Labour policy remains rather vague. This is particularly apparent when we look at Labour (and Liberal Democrat) attitudes to a referendum, which are hedged about with conditions that link a promise to listen to the nation with major changes within the EU affecting existing treaties. But it is also apparent when we look at the lack of precision shown in discussions about renegotiation.

It is becoming more and more obvious that a fundamental aspect of renegotiation is convincing the EU that it has to change: it is not simply a question of Britain's relationship with Europe, or that of any other countries that might be tempted to follow suit; it is also necessary to recognize that the political structures and economic relationships that have come into being in Europe have become unsatisfactory for many members. Above all, it is important to recognize that the 'European project' is a dangerously vague concept, especially for states (of which the United Kingdom is not the only one) that value their distinctive identity, expressed through their history, culture and legal system, not to mention economic profiles that differ enormously from state to state. There is no single European political culture.

The situation in 1975 was in many ways quite different. The 'European project' had not advanced as far as it has in the last couple of decades, following Maastricht and Lisbon. The arguments were still largely concerned with a Common Market and Britain's wish to maintain

economic ties with Commonwealth countries, particularly New Zealand. As under Margaret Thatcher, there was always the problem of how much Britain should be paying into the European coffers. Britain's relatively small and efficient agricultural sector did not fit well alongside that of France. Moreover, the Wilson years were a time of successive economic crises, such as the devaluation of the pound that had already occurred in 1968, when the Prime Minister appeared on television to impress the public with the argument that 'the pound in your pocket' is still worth the same amount. Wilson, of course, was a consummate operator. As Oliver Lewis' essay shows, Wilson shamelessly excluded Peter Shore and Anthony Wedgwood Benn (as he was once known) from his European strategy.

Historians are rightly wary of preaching lessons from the past. Even allowing for the great differences between Europe in 1975 and Europe in 2014, or 2017 if that turns out to be the date of a referendum, the fundamental issues raised in this paper should not be forgotten: renegotiation has to achieve real results; the presentation of the case for and against has to be fair and balanced. This account of Harold Wilson's canny contriving's does indeed leave one uneasy. But he was that type of Prime Minister.

### **David Abulafia FBA**

Cambridge University

Over the next few months, officials were not only busy discussing renegotiation with their European colleagues but were also busy working out the scope of renegotiation, moulding an agreement that would let the Prime Minister show something had changed, while preventing any substantial change. Among officials it was – and still is – referred to as a “so-called renegotiation.”<sup>101</sup> Proposals that would require Treaty change were “amended”.<sup>102</sup> In FCO reports, officials described how they were focussed on “the degree to which they seem likely to achieve our policy directive. The chances of getting them accepted... [and] problems of presentation at home and abroad.”<sup>103</sup> The first two points show the limits that defined the FCO's approach, the last point makes it clear that their mind was always on how they could pitch the renegotiation to a home audience. In a very frank note officials declared “British policy in and towards Europe [has] had a single, over-riding objective: the creation of conditions for a successful referendum.”<sup>104</sup>

(Part of Oliver Lewis's essay, particular reference to footnotes 163-167)

101 Interview between Oliver Lewis and Sir Michael Butler, 22 July 2013

102 Confidential memo on renegotiation, released to Business for Britain via FOI request

103 Draft paper by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary for ECS, FCO 30/2387, TNA

104 Permanent Under-Secretary's Planning Committee: Objectives for British foreign policy after the referendum, 17 June 1975, FCO 30/2947, TNA

## Interview with Oliver Lewis 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018, London.

### In your view what is the role of the historian in modern society?

That's an interesting question. Basically, as bit of background, I was the person who came up with the idea of the *Historians for Britain*. I was a director of research for an organization called *Business for Britain*. Now *Business for Britain* had been set up by a guy called Matthew Elliot who went on to be CEO of the *Vote Leave Campaign*, and I was director of research. *Business for Britain* had been set up with a very clear idea that a EU referendum was coming, and that basically we had several years to address structural problems that, the *Leave Campaign* would have. Before that and that reason was basically that the business community, especially the CBR, the Confederation for Treasury who had been seen to be pro-EU. So, we just said we have to get business people on board to basically say actually we're not happy with the EU membership, we've got to go in a different direction etc.

As we were doing that it struck me that actually it wasn't just business that we needed to get on-board it was also academia. So basically, the nightmare scenario I had in my mind as the referendum began and in the same way our fear had been that business wants to stay. The fear would be that the smart people and the academics want to stay. So, we thought okay, actually we've got to get out in the same way, and we thought the obvious profession to target academia was historians, they were two reasons for this. The first is that they are as it were proper academics who understand, the history of the UK, its relationship with Europe and also, I think it's all about context and rich arguments for why Britain would be okay outside of the EU. I think they will be able to effectively argue that Britain before England and Scotland had been independent for centuries. And I said there's a slight real politic argument in it as well, which is just these would be extremely smart people and it would basically show that at the very least, people who are highly educated were split on the issue.

So basically, I say the role of historian, it's two roles basically one is as an academic, as a proper scrutinizer of the past and truth seeker, which makes them highly credible. The second role which is slightly more abstract, it's almost like they are the guardians of the past,

at least in the public's eye. They are the people who had the most authority and can say this is what happened, and that sort of custodianship on the past.

### **How did historians respond to the Brexit debate (in particular *Historians for Britain*)?**

Basically, there was two distinct phases for that. The first was the preliminary phase which was before David Cameron won the 2015 election. So that sort of like 2013 to 2015, and there you had a proper engagement by historians which was really interesting. We'd have all these dinners, we'd invite lots and lots of historians over. And it's basically two ways they responded, the first was to engage very thoroughly in the conversation and talk about the nature of Britain and Europe, to talk about their role as historians and whether or not they should be talking about it. And we'd had lots of historians who were pro-European as well and they said actually I'm a big believer in this, I think it's the natural narrative of our... which was interesting. We also found that there was a reluctance by many to get involved in the political game at all, and you know they would say, I completely agree with you, I completely... however, I don't want to be part of the political...

### **Interviewer: Yes, because the majority of the historians were silent, *Historians for Britain* only had 45 supporters**

Yeah, we only did have a few dozen, they were top names. We really went for quality over quantity. There was also left right splits, I would say. We found it quite tricky to find left-winged historians who were Eurosceptic, interestingly, it was definitely people of a more wide-leaning persuasion who had been more... the obvious was David Starkey and... so that was the first phase. Then it all changed when referendum campaign actually began, and that's when suddenly, a lot of historians suddenly became very, very vocal about *Historians for Britain*. And basically, saw escalation of claims which frankly in my opinion were ridiculous, nationalists trying to like distort history etc. I remember one blog post by someone and he says, if you look at the *Historians for Britain* website one of the documents they have is a huge history of England. This shows the nationalist like agenda, well I bought that website, it was a stock quota of a website. But as I was saying there was this all quite intense escalation. (Referring to *Academics for Britain in Europe* and other pro-European groups.) And a lot of people, I would say, some were distinguished like Simon Schama, but

a lot of people who were not particularly distinguished in the field I would argue, so they got hundreds rather than dozens. And I would argue that the position they took was, it was a typical referendum campaign, it was very polarized and there was a lot of this in their arguments. It wasn't informed by a proper, substantial case in the same way that *Historians for Britain* was. The main thing they engaged in was basically trying to attack *Historians for Britain* on nationalist grounds. The *Guardian*, they did an editorial on David Abulafia who was our chairman. And the whole attacking it as sort of a nationalist conspiracy. So yeah, and at that point it became much harder to get people to... it both became harder in some respects because people basically said *Historians for Britain* is awful. But there were some historians and the who actually came out the woodwork as a result and said yes, I will support you Gwythian Prins, for instance. And it was a such a degree of free advertising that came, so they were both two very interesting phases.

*Historians for Britain* was slightly different, *Historians for Britain* was genuinely probing negotiations. In order to get on these top historians on-board, we would let it be genuinely pro negotiation. We didn't know which side it was going to fall after a referendum was called, there was a chance that *Historians for Britain* would have gone the other side. We had a vote and the overall number did come back and said yes, I will be voting to leave and therefore, *Historians for Britain* became one of the public endorsers of the *Vote Leave* campaign.

**You point out that the media had a largely positive view on Europe in your essay, 'Lessons from the 1975 EU renegotiation'. However, the medias view on Europe changed over time to what Oliver Daddow terms 'permissive consensus to destructive dissent' Do you think today's Eurosceptic media helped *Historians for Britain* in their campaign?**

To certain extent..., it was definitely a huge help. I think we had media who had seen through a lot of the pro-European arguments. As far as the historians were concerned, yes it was helpful because--well for two reasons. The first is the press became polarized in the same sort of way I described, so you had on one side *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, (Eurosceptic) and the other the *Guardian* and the *Independent* (pro-European). In this respect, it was useful for us because you had one side who were only too willing to give you the historians arguments as we deploy them. And one of the things that we found in addition to provide intellectual

arguments, intellectual credibility, what it also did was it allowed us to provide answers to a few very tricky questions. So, one of the tricky questions was the EU is responsible for peace in Europe from then on whenever journalists said, how do we respond to this claim? We would say well here's the collection of essays by top historians saying that this is a myth. And so, it provided the argument by... in that respect it was good that we had media who are willing to engage with us a lot more than they would have been in the 1970s. And then we were able to deploy our arguments there, but on the other there was the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. Who were in some ways inversely making our case because they would be reporting on some of the *History Today* stuff and the historians kept on the other side attacking. So, in that respect they were inadvertently acting as soapbox as well.

### **What motivated *Historians for Britain* to come together in the first place?**

It was definitely not inspired by anything in particular. The only like inspiring thing I have is I remember reading... I was doing some research on the AV referendum. And a bunch of historians had come together to write a letter for that for the campaign, and that was just a letter. And so that was the initial fall, well let's do a letter initially, and then as we were doing the letter, I thought well why don't we just carry on and see if we can build something from this as a result. And then we did the branding and I think Matthew Elliot basically said go ahead, see what you can build.

### **What type of organisation was *Historians for Britain* (a think-tank, a campaign group?), how did you view yourselves?**

That's a very interesting question and I think it's a mixed hybrid of the two. I suppose you can call it an advocacy group.

David Abulafia gave an extremely good definition of what *Historians for Britain* was, which was it was a chance for historians to basically engage in a contemporary issue and provide a context which was otherwise lacking. And which in this particular instance, was needed. In that respect it's not quite right, to call it a think-tank even though it had aspects of think tankery, like producing the reports and the holding of seminars. But it wasn't quite



necessarily a full-on advocacy group as well in that it was lobbying to say, it was just trying to inject an intellectual well-reasoned, well-sourced argument into the debate. And I'd say it worked.

**Who were your target audience?**

The general public.

**You say in your view the campaign was a great success, would you like to elaborate on that?**

The narrative was extremely successful because it was able to insert itself quite strategically. I've written an article for this you should remind me and email me, and I'll send it to you for Conservative History Magazine like a few months ago. Basically... the dynamic is dozens of historians who signed up, it keeps on growing over time. So, it's Britain and that's your first phase pre-May 2015. And what happens is that the journalists, initially they go well what is this? You know I remember it being pitched and they go we're historians why do we care? But then we produced the first batch of essays and we sent it out on email, and the responses started coming from journalists which was can you send us a hard copy? I've never actually been asked for a hard copy of a report before, this is really interesting. And they would report on it and they would come up and *Historians for Britain* reports would come up in the press and they would do... and that argument started to change. You could tell there was this intangible shift in the way the EU was represented by journalists, which was look, businesses are split and academics are split. Which meant that when the remaining side really kicked into gear post-general election, and they ran this through the historians, sure they were able to get a lot more than we were, but the narrative had been set. It was always going to be historians are split, academics are split. I mean we basically... the way we, the very crude way we looked at the campaign in those early days. Obviously, a lot more sophisticated but when you think about it, it's almost like a chess board, and each square represents a group. The question is which groups do you win on and which groups do you lose on? So, for example, business we're set to lose, so how can we instead of losing make it a draw. Because if people think it's a draw then that the says we should leave, so it's a win. So as far as possible you wanted that... so if you can imagine it almost being red for

we're gonna lose, yellow for split, and green if we win. And you'd want that chess board basically to have no red. So, with *Historians for Britain* was to turn a red square to a yellow square, turning a group which at the beginning everyone said it's united by the European Project into a split European Project, and I'd argue we were successful.

**Do you think *Historians for Britain* could have done more to attract more supporters?**

Maybe. I mean, the thing with *Historians for Britain* it was completely different on the academic scene and the political scene. There was many in academia who responded very badly to it because not just they disagreed with politics, but they disagreed with that this was the role of the historians. I remember getting some push-back from various people saying, the role of historians is not to be active in modern society, their place is firmly in the past. That definition of a historian that I disagreed with, because I think they do have a role to play, everyone has a role to play in...

It also it sort of misses you know the Marxist legacy of certain people like Christopher Hill and you know others, who basically were a lot more active in politics admirably so, as we've known their politics. So, there was people saying actually this is not the role of historians, yada. I think what *Historians for Britain* did do, everyone for one day will be resurrected in some way, shape, or form, it made the idea of being involved respectful. Respectful may be the wrong word, it made it real again because people could say you know, the enemy of *Historians for Britain*, the people that were saying that there's no way that we agree with these guys. They're wrong in their perception of history, they're closet racist etc. The one thing they couldn't deny is that we're making an impact. So, I wouldn't say respectable because even though I thought *Historians for Britain* were eminently respectable in everything we produced and said with those who disagreed. But it made historians once again active, and I think there was that shift. In the same way that you know you're writing a thesis after it, in that respect, it was a success, maybe the failure is that we didn't carry on post referendum in that respect. And it is a... sadly life takes hold after, I just simply don't have the time to carry it on. Which is a source of disappointment and maybe one day the stars will once again align and will be resurrected.

**Few *Historians for Britain* supporters were historians of modern Europe, do you think this is something which should have been addressed?**

I mean as I said we, there was a few things what we went for, the main one was quality. The first criteria were serious academic credentials, not necessarily well known to the public. But people who were without a doubt at the top of their game within the academy, that was David Abulafia you know, head of history at Cambridge author of numerous books and winner of all sorts of prestigious awards. And the wonderful thing about David Abulafia was even when they were throwing vitriolic hate at him from the other side, they couldn't dispute the fact that this was an extraordinarily serious historian, far more accomplished than the vast majority of theirs. Not an attention seeker, but a really serious person. The second criteria were completely different, it was historians who the public knew about and that was David Starkey.

So, it was basically in that respect we posed a win win, a dream... it was wonderful to have, for example, at our events, photos of David Starkey next to David Abulafia because you ticked the two boxes. The academy would have taken it seriously and the public will have taken it credibly.

I mean beyond that, I was interested in getting a left right split personally, I thought it was important to show political consensus. We did have some left-wing historians, but not as many I would have liked. And then on... there was a lot of concern about wanting a gender balance. Unfortunately, this wasn't possible and certainly wasn't for the lack of trying.

The focus was overall quality more than anything else. We did have Europeans who Ana Abulafia, David Abulafia's wife is European, she was on board. And yeah, we welcomed people from all over, we also had Americans on board so Ted Burma from Yale was on board as well. So, we did definitely go for like the international cause that was one of the philosophies that we knocked in. It was that we went in and we saw Europe as a... in many ways was a step backwards from a British tradition of engaging wider world.

**Just over a quarter of *Historians for Britain* supporters had an affiliation with Oxford or Cambridge is there any particular reason for this degree of concentration?**

Purely because that's where I had most of the links, I studied at Oxford so I knew a bunch of historians there and when I still went and saw old tutors they would say well go down the road and talk to so and so, and so and so. And to that lead to some good results, yes, you're probably right there was a certain degree of concentration as a result. Not deliberately, purely that majority of being an entrepreneur is that you have to deal with what you've got.

**Would you describe *Historians for Britain* as non-partisan?**

Oh definitely 100%, 100% like it was as I said it was very clear that we... if you look at the original letter we sent to the *Times*, and then if you go on to our website--I'm not sure if our website is still up online, if there's a copy of it anywhere.

There's a big pounding statement and that is big if I remember rightly is on non-partisanship and on different schools of thought. And there's certainly I mean it wasn't even 100% guaranteed that they were going to back the *Leave* referendum. It was meant to be more than anything else, a chance for historians to inject an intellect core perspective into a debate, into a crucial debate which needed that.

**Do you think the Brexit debate effected the community's historians in Britain? Did it put strain on relationships?**

Oh yeah but I can't go into details but I knew of certain who had felt under pressure from certain people as a result of that and you know had disagreements as a result of it. And you know if you think about it I mean, if you think about it, with David Abulafia, I mean here's one of the most distinguished historians of our time and to actually know that *The Guardian* have done a hit job exactly you know it was immensely to their personal and their intellectual

credit, that they persevered and marched on. And you know I honestly think that, especially with the referendum result. The role that they played making this happen is valuable.

**Did you read about Niall Ferguson, famously changing his mind?**

Yes, he did. He ignored all of our emails that we sent him. He was approached from the first letter all the way back, in fact we actually delayed it a little bit because we thought we got through the secretary and she said yes, I'll get to you just hold on. And nothing happened.

I mean you know remind me, yeah now it reminds me of just how frustrating some of it was but no, it's obviously great to have him on board. Besides he's a very distinguished historian and yeah, it just--

And also, I'd argue that he was my point to that degree about the nature of those who oppose, in that you can tell post referendum how he's started to much more critically think and engage with the subject. I would argue that his reasoning post referendum, is far more you know well thought out and articulated it's immensely to his credit.

And immensely to her credit, I would say to Mary Beard as well she had a very well-reasoned argument like based on the Roman Empire heritage. So yeah, she is a good example of someone who actually properly engaged in the debate.

**Is there anything you would like to ask me?**

I mean I would want to disappear in two seconds so what I am curious about, is I suppose though, why *Historians for Britain*. Is there any reason you thought that'll be interesting to talk about?

Me: Yeah just sort of I was searching around when I started studying my masters, just stuff to write it on... we had a historiography module at the start when we-- So then I wrote about, the historiography of Britain's relationship in the EU and, and then gradually I was searching around when I was writing and came to *Historians for Britain* website, and I thought this could be a really interesting thing to write the actual masters on so it kind of evolved from there.

## Oliver Lewis to Conservative history magazine 2018.

The relationship between history and politics may be deep, but at times can be eerily uneasy. We want and expect our historians to analyse yesterday's political debates - new books on figures such as Sir Robert Peel, Sir Winston Churchill and even parliamentary events like the Great Reform Act often appear on the shelves of our bookshops, with publishers quietly confident of a handsome return. But what happens when the historian turns his or her eye to the present? Do historians have a role to play in current political debate?

Between 2014 and 2016 this question became a permanent fixture in my life as I sought to encourage some of Britain's leading historical thinkers to engage in British politics. As the research director of *Business for Britain* (a role I would continue when the organisation transformed into the *Vote Leave* campaign) I had a firm view that historians had a key role to play in the EU debate.

To my mind, there was one compelling reason to bring historians on-board - credibility. There was a desperate need in 2014 to bring academic, Eurosceptic voices into the debate. At that point, the academic community had a reputation for being uniformly pro-EU, a major handicap for the Eurosceptic cause.

And so, with the support of some of the greatest historical minds of modern times, 'Historians for Britain' was launched. Led by the exceptional Professor David Abulafia, the group immediately had a great deal of credibility. This respectability was only bolstered when our ranks were joined by other luminaries, such as Professor Robert Tombs, Dr Andrew Roberts, Dr David Starkey and Professor Gwythian Prins.

The historians were clear - they were not 'anti-Europe', nor were they even 'anti-EU'. What united them was a belief that the EU was headed in the wrong direction. Put in the context of Europe's history, the policies of 'ever closer union' (which were then ravishing Greece) seemed at best foolhardy and at worst immoral. The historians pledged to support David Cameron's mission of securing Treaty change in order to rewrite Britain's troubled relationship with the union.

To make the point that 'ever closer union' was a historical nonsense, the historians released a batch of essays exploring the notion of a 'European demos'. Fine original research demonstrated conclusively that there was no such thing as a 'European identity' and that the very idea was potentially dangerous (were it to follow a path similar to the emergence of Italian and German identities in the 19th Century).

The publication of this first collection of essays and the announcement of the group was initially met with bafflement by many journalists. Rather than answering questions on the essays, I found myself facing questions like why would historians have a role to play in any political debate, let alone one as important as the question of Britain's membership of the EU? But the essays' originality nonetheless garnered interest. After the initial puzzlement subsided, the essays were well received - and journalists were soon ringing the Business for Britain office, requesting hard copies to keep on their desks. By the time of the referendum, *Historians for Britain* had released four publications, covering topics ranging from the 1975 referendum to the role of the EU in keeping peace in Europe.

When the referendum began, it was *The Economist* which first noted the role that *Historians for Britain* had played in developing the credibility of the Eurosceptic cause. Lamenting the lack of an equivalent on the pro-EU side, the magazine noted the intellectual 'star dust' that the leave campaign was accumulating. *The Guardian* even devoted an alarmed editorial to the dangers of *Historians for Britain* - something we took as a big compliment.

By the time the 'Vote Leave' campaign emerged from *Business for Britain*, it was clear that the Cameron Government's promise of 'full on Treaty change' was never going to materialise. Faced with the choice of either leaving the EU or 'ever-closer-union', *Historians for Britain* pledged to support Vote Leave.

While the pro-EU faction in the referendum did eventually assemble 'Historians in for Britain', it came far too late to make a real difference. *Historians for Britain* had become established in the media's mind as the 'go-to' for intellectual comment. Within two years the media's depiction of the academic community had shifted from being uniformly Europhile to split down the middle. After two years of work, one of the Eurosceptic cause's biggest weaknesses had been removed.

In a debate that was often rancorous and blighted with accusations of 'dumbing down', the historians provided a welcome oasis of detailed analysis, extended research and intellectual



rigorousness. In addition to shifting perception, I'd argue that *Historians for Britain* made the debate far more insightful and brought much-needed academic rigour to our political debate. If nothing else, I consider this a real success.

Here's hoping that now the historians have discovered the present, they decide to stay.

## Email Correspondence with Oliver Lewis, 18/09/2017.

### Paul Hemmer wrote:

Hi Oliver,

I am a masters in history student with the University of Bergen Norway.

I have found some of the research published on the *Historians for Britain* website very interesting.

I wonder if you could perhaps answer some questions for me which will help me in my master thesis.

How and why was the campaign group established, and who were there driving forces behind this campaign?

How did the campaign develop with regards to the general public as well as fellow historians?

### Oliver Lewis replied:

Hi Paul,

Great to hear from you.

I helped set up the campaign while I was working for *Business for Britain* in 2013. I worked with Professor David Abulafia who was a real inspiration and driving force. I had the original idea of a letter of historians to go to the Times in 2013

(<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-need-a-new-deal-on-europe-or-we-quit-say-historians-g7q3vqvbnkn>). While trying to get signatures I met Professor Abulafia, who was a great supporter and wanted to help rally Eurosceptics in academia in order to provide a historical perspective to the campaign for a looser relationship with the EU. I agreed to help

and this turned into *Historians for Britain*.

The campaign was - in my view - a great success. It set the tone that academics were increasingly sceptical of the EU project. This gave support to the efforts for a renegotiation of Britain's EU membership and - when Cameron failed to secure this - there was a vote of all the signatories and the overwhelming majority voted for *Historians for Britain* to support 'Vote Leave'.

This was important, as it meant that there was no united academic view during the referendum campaign. Efforts by 'Remain' to claim, in effect, that 'all smart people want Britain to stay in the EU' failed to convince anyone.

At the same time, *Historians for Britain* produced material that articulated sensible concerns with the EU project. These concerns were picked up in the media and I think really went a long way towards improving the quality of the debate. If memory serves, *the Economist* did a very good bit on this. (There were accusations of jingoism by some, but this was based on a very misleading interpretation of what we were saying).

Oliver

## Interview with Paul Lay, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017, London.

**Do you feel that the Brexit debate made history more politicalized?**

Irrelevant.

Utterly. Utterly and completely irrelevant. Exactly the sheer lack of- It's like in this country now, when you talk about the lack of opposition, it's destroying the politics of this country. You need two sides to knock with gradations between. When it came to Brexit, I suppose it's drawn the worst of the two sides. There was one who was overwhelming and it was just catastrophic. And it's exactly the same here. You need a dialectic, you need to draw them against each other and it just didn't happen and so what? They lost.

Because they won't propose to more people. And there were so many people from that kind of myriad, that intellectual class, who weren't prepared to make the case. They just thought it was hopeless.

**Do you think a more nuanced debate amongst historians may have improved the level of the debate?**

Yeah, I think it is really really important that historians should have done that. But they are not willing to do so. There was no-- when you shot down people as populist or racist, or anything but that, the debate ends. Once you start calling people racist, you place some kind of sentence which is somewhat an exaggeration like witchcraft.

We were talking about it, I said Noah Malcolm. The man who was *The Spectators* foreign reporter in Yugoslavia during the time of its breakdown. He's risked his life, he speaks many languages, he speaks Albanian, apparently very elegantly. Indeed, a man who has just written the most extraordinary work about traders throughout Mediterranean, anything but a little Englander. They wanted to concentrate on using Hobbesian arguments of democracy and sovereignty that is people like Malcolm's arguments. And that's exactly the same. These are perfectly legitimate arguments but it's also perfectly legitimate to disagree with them. But

there was no intent to do so. That is what - it's just that the debate is very solemn.

And despite any action I made, it is plainly not gonna happen.

**Did you make any reflections before you made your own views public in History Today?**

I have come to a point where I just think that the whole University system is shaking up.

I think that humanities are in a really catastrophic place. I wonder if I was talking to a perspective undergraduate. I would say I need some increase in the case of the best historians were big with the languages. I'd say don't do it. Study Russian. Study Arabic. Study Chinese. Study French, German.

And our world view has become so diminished that we need to go out into the world and think about what history is about. Because it's become the emphasis on microhistory the emphasis on social history. this means that we are missing the big picture.

They are so concerned about the virtue, they are so concerned about sending out the right message, rather than doing what historians should do which is- When you finish a history lesson, a good history lesson. You, should feel the part, that's what I think. Never come out from a lecture thinking "that's what I should do".

You should sit with it What do I think? That's what it's about. An endless questioning, and endless argument, and we've forgotten that we just want it to be handed down, facts, they often aren't facts but- It's almost as if historians have become memory men again. There's people saying, "when was the battle of... "who is the...."

Yeah, it's very very passive. Let's start arguing again, and it was very depressing to a point where the analogies become so bad, from the weekend that Trump was elected.

## Was there a lack of intellectual engagement?

No there is nothing. There is nothing. And that's, that's the key problem. So, who can network well, they will search some people within *Historians in Britain*, their main problem is their name because what does that make *Historians of Britain*. Historians could mean anything.

So, you have a chronology, that from my perspective starts with the original parts of our editorial which made points that I suppose was the kind of points about British and particularly English abstractionism that were made by our fellowmen in the 19th century-

Which is a valid point. How important those - Well I don't know, but it's a perfectly valid thing to argue. It became clear this was not going to be okay. It's quite obvious after that, that the only people who were willing to debate were tenured white male, middle-aged, elderly, white. Noah Malcolm be perhaps the most articulate. This is a man who speaks 13 languages. It's very very interesting that the people who were on the "leave" side were often more cosmopolitan than the people on the "remain" side.

## Email correspondence with Abigail Green, 01/10/2017.

**Paul Hemmer wrote:**

Hi Abigail,

I am a masters in history student with the University of Bergen in Norway. I am currently doing research for my master thesis. The main area of research for this is the campaign group called *Historians for Britain*.

The research questions I currently have are;

How and why was the campaign group *Historians for Britain* established, and who were the driving forces behind this campaign?

How did the campaign develop with regards to the general public as well as fellow historians?

I wonder if you have any insights into these questions you could share, I would be most grateful if you did.

**Abigail Green replied:**

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your email. My feeling is that it would be wrong to describe *Historians for Britain* as a campaign group. I signed the first letter, which was essentially a call for renegotiation of the relationship between Britain and the EU taking into account especially the situation created by the Euro. I did not sign further letters because it became clear to me that the group was sponsored by an organisation called *Business for Britain*, and I felt I didn't

know enough about what that organisation's agenda was. However, I did not withdraw my name from *Historians for Britain* because whenever they sent me a copy of a communication I found it generally quite sensible.

At one point a group of historians did produce a letter stating an alternative view, and I found myself disagreeing quite strongly with some elements of it which I thought were extremely naïve and ahistorical. For instance, both as a Jew and a Jewish historian I found the idea that the Marconi scandal had been in any way equivalent to the Dreyfus Affair, or that Jewish life in Britain could be compared in any way with the Jewish experience in continental Europe in the 1930s and 1940s actually quite shocking. There were other things but that is the thing I now remember. I recall discussing this counter-letter with a couple of colleagues, neither of them associated with *Historians for Britain*, and both modern European historians who eventually voted Remain. They shared my concerns about it, and agreed that the *Historians for Britain* letter was misrepresented in it, because it was hard to argue with many of the things *Historians for Britain* said from a historical point of view. In short, rather than leaping to conclusions about the 'jingoistic' *Historians for Britain* agenda, I would urge you to read and reflect upon what the group actually said. I also very much objected to the assumption by colleagues circulating this counter-letter that other colleagues would inevitably agree with them.

In the lead, up to the referendum campaign, those associated with the group were consulted about what stance it should take with regard to the different branches of the Leave campaign. At that point, David Abulafia (to my mind the leading force behind it) informed us - I think all of us, but I did encounter him at a college event so it might have been in person - that the balance of opinion was about 2/3 leave and 1/3 remain, and in his reply to me I think he indicated that he too had not yet made up his mind about how he would vote. That too suggests *Historians for Britain* was not a campaigning group. I think that neither the general public (probably uninterested) nor fellow historians appreciated this point.

**Email correspondence with Robert Tombs, 13/10/2017.**



**Paul Hemmer wrote:**

Hi Robert

I am a masters in history student based at the University of Bergen Norway.

I am currently doing research for my thesis, the main topic for this is *Historians for Britain*.

I wonder if you could perhaps shed some light into my research questions?

How and why was *Historians for Britain* established, and who were the driving forces behind the group?

How did the campaign develop with regards to the general public as well as fellow historians?

What type of organisation was/is *Historians for Britain*?

Did *Historians for Britain* change strategy and approach in the run-up/after the referendum?

I would be most grateful if you have time to answer any of these.

**Robert Tombs Replied:**

I'm not sure I can be much help, as my association with the group was rather tenuous. I seem to remember I signed a collective letter to the press (which I didn't draft, but suggested some changes to, which were accepted), and wrote a historical piece for a pamphlet they published; in connection with that I attended a public meeting in London. Other than that, nothing as far as I recall.

I was quite happy with the official position of the group, which was that Britain would probably stay within a reformed EU. But as no reforms were forthcoming, I hesitantly decided we should vote to leave (hesitantly, because of the complexity and difficulty of the process). My position now is strongly that the decision has been taken, and must be carried through vigorously.

But someone who was far more involved, and closer to the origin of the group I think, was my colleague David Abulafia, who might be able to help you more.

I'd be interested to know what you find out and say - but I suppose you'll be writing in Norwegian, which I'm afraid I do not know (despite two very enjoyable holidays in Norway).

## Email Correspondence with A.W. Purdue, 16/10/2017.

**Paul Hemmer wrote:**

Dear Bill,

I am a master in history student with the University of Bergen Norway.

I am doing research for my master thesis on *Historians for Britain*. I have my bachelor from Northumbria and noticed you were visiting professor there.

I was wondering if you could perhaps help me with some of my research questions?

How and why was *Historians for Britain* established, and who were the driving forces behind the group?

How did the campaign develop with regards to the general public as well as fellow historians?

What type of organisation was/is *Historians for Britain*?

Did *Historians for Britain* change strategy and approach in the run-up/after the referendum?

I would be most grateful if you have time to answer any of these.

**A.W. Purdue replied:**

Dear Paul,

Happy to help you So far as I can.

There's almost certainly a *Historians for Britain* website which as details of formation of *Historians for Britain* but it's basically a group of mainly Conservative or conservative historians, though with some Eurosceptic Labour supporters. Professor David Abulafia is or was the chairman and Andrew Roberts, David Starkey and Sheila Lawlor, prominent supporters. I presume you've seen 'Peace-makers or credit takers' published during the referendum campaign, to which I contributed an essay. The group was closely linked to *Business for Britain* and during the referendum campaign and, like it, was part of *Vote Leave*. It prided itself on taking a rational and analytical view as opposed to the more UKIPish and emotional organisation.

Do let me know if you require any more info. I imagine that a Norwegian perspective is interesting considering Norway's relationship with the EU.

Best wishes

Bill

## **Email Correspondence with David Abulafia, 18/10/2017.**

Here are some brief answers. You should, though, look at the attached document, which shows our thinking at least in the early stages, especially on the effects of leaving - best wishes David Abulafia

### **How and why was *Historians for Britain* established, and who were the driving forces behind the group?**

*Historians for Britain* was established when it became plain that the UK government intended to hold a referendum about membership of the EU. It was funded by *Business for Britain*, an organization that took as its motto CHANGE OR GO.

### **How did the campaign develop with regards to the general public as well as fellow historians?**

Initially we included both those who were certain the UK should leave the EU and others who argued for radical reform of the EU, in accordance with the theme of CHANGE OR GO. When it became plain that the terms offered to David Cameron were very disappointing, some members decided they would nonetheless prefer to remain within the EU, but most decided that they had no option but to leave. The Leavers then fell under the auspices of the national Leave campaign, into which *Business for Britain* merged.

### **What type of organisation was/is *Historians for Britain*?**

A think-tank holding private and public meetings and discussions, with panels of historians and political figures.

### **Did *Historians for Britain* change strategy and approach in the run-up/after the referendum?**

As explained, *Historians for Britain* initially included both Remainers and Leavers, and then shifted to Leave after the results of Cameron's negotiations were announced.

Let me also add that there was a certain amount of publicity in the press - articles, letters, some of which stirred up controversy (e.g. in HISTORY TODAY magazine).

