

# HISTORY BULLETIN

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'There has been no more important decision in recent times than whether Britain should remain in the EU...Some pooling of sovereignty was regarded as necessary to prevent extremes of nationalism...Is this now just history? Britain felt it needed Europe then. Does it no longer?'

**Professor Ian Kershaw**

'That's a view of British history that essentially leaves out empire and I think that is very pernicious.'

**Professor Ruth Harris**

'England's semi-detached relationship with continental Europe is neither new nor an aberration.'

**Dr David Starkey**

Britain has a history of 'aggressive imperialism...expropriation, slavery, massacres, oppression anyone?'

**Professor Neil Gregor**

'The distinctive character of the UK is rooted in its largely uninterrupted history since the middle ages'

**Professor David Abulafia**



## HISTORIANS AND BREXIT: DOES BRITAIN'S HISTORY SEPARATE HER FROM EUROPE?

Is history relevant? A common view amongst those who would answer 'no' is that history deals only with the past. Not true! Historians are frequently sucked into contemporary politics and from there, into controversy. There is an argument that when a country is going through an identity crisis, it calls on its historians.

In Germany in the 1960s, an academic argument about whether the country had been responsible for war in 1914 provoked a ferocious public debate—because of the implications that Nazism was not a solitary aberration in German history. The bicentenary of the French Revolution provoked a sharp division between French historians about the true meaning of 1789—with the Left celebrating the revolution as a triumph of liberty and the Right emphasizing the way in which it had descended into terror and despotism.

Disputes between British historians have tended to be more muted politically but the spectre of Brexit as led to heated argument about Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe. Vivid headlines followed Boris Johnson's comparison of the EU with Hitler. Cameron meanwhile claimed 'from Caesar's legions to the wars of Spanish succession, from Napoleonic wars to the fall of the Berlin Wall...Britain has always been a European power.'

The blatant attempts to appeal to the 'real' British history tap into a debate which

has been raging in universities with increasing heat. The trigger was the formation of 'Historians for Britain' in which a group of leading historians argued in an open letter, that Britain should only stay in a 'radically reformed' Europe. This produced a blistering response from a larger group of historians. An article in *History Today*, *Fog in the Channel, Historians isolated* contested the idea that Britain has a unique and 'distinctive character' which separates it from its European neighbours.

'Historians for Britain' argue that British institutions have more continuity, with the roots of the British parliament being grounded in the C13th whilst continental political history is more violent and less moderate. David Abulafia, a Cambridge professor, claimed that 'fascism and anti-Semitism never struck deep roots in Britain'. Opponents dispute the claim of exceptionality

citing aggressive imperialism, slavery and massacres. Edward I was the first European king to expel Jews from the entire kingdom in 1290 whilst the Marconi corruption scandal in 1912 featured plenty of anti-Semitic rhetoric. Countering this, can the Marconi scandal and the Holocaust really be compared?

British voters will make their decisions on 23rd June primarily on political and economic grounds but there are cultural arguments as well. Few, if any voters will be swayed by the historical debates. But the recent slang-matches between historians have pulled attention towards the issue of national identity and it is hard to argue that it is not at the heart of the debate.

*For more detail on this debate see the Financial Times, 14th May, 2016.*





There has been much in the media about campaigns to remove the 'celebration' of British imperialism, not least Cecil Rhodes' statue in Oxford. This is part of a bigger debate about whether countries like Britain should apologise for their imperial past. **Tristram Hunt** who recently spoke at Haileybury, wrote an interesting article in **Prospect** arguing that we should stop thinking of colonialism as exclusively good or bad. Instead, imperialism had complex consequences, reflecting the diverse nature of an empire which stretched from treaty ports in China to plantations in Ulster. He argues the public debate is 'tediously divided' along the good versus evil matrix. Given Haileybury's close connection with Empire, it is worth thinking about where you stand.

## Oxbridge Thinking

### Europeans: The Roots of Identity BBC Radio 4

Professor Margaret MacMillan (who happens to be Lloyd George's granddaughter as well as a fine historian) considers the development of European identity. She visits Rome, Estonia and Amsterdam, considering where Europe ends, how did it relate to the wider world and what did it owe to its Roman past. She might have asked how Australia came to enter the Eurovision song contest.....

## The Spanish Civil War: Eighty Years on

On 1 April 1939, the Spanish general, Francisco Franco, penned a two line memo that read 'Today, with the Red Army captive and disarmed, our victorious troops have achieved their final objectives. The war is over.' At present none of the Haileybury history courses explicitly covers the three year conflict which drove divisions in Europe deeper between 1936 and '39. Although a 'civil' war, in many ways it was a European war fought on Spanish soil. It illuminates the ideological crises of the 1930s and had repercussions well beyond Spain. Whilst Franco's nationalists were supported by Italy and Germany, the assorted Left wing Republicans had more limited support—from Soviet Russia and the so-called International Brigade. This was a volunteer army assembled from 54 nations, eventually numbering 35,000. Whilst Franco could call on Hitler's new Condor Legion planes, the International Brigade was ill-trained. It included idealistic artists, writers, photographers and philosophers. They lost the war but left behind some great works. **Homage to Catalonia** by **George Orwell** (who was shot in the neck during the conflict) is one of the best books on war you can read. **As I Walked out one Midsummer Morning** by **Laurie Lee** is another classic memoir. One effect of the Spanish conflict was to turn Left wing idealists from the widespread belief in pacifism into people who thought that some wars were actually worth fighting. The Labour Party began to support British rearmament and urged the abandonment of Appeasement.

To read more about the civil war try **A. Beevor's** accessible **The Battle for Spain**. A new book has just been published about the 2,800 Americans who fought in Spain—**Spain in our Hearts** by **Adam Hochschild**. The American view of the Spanish Civil War was very influenced by the Cold War, but this takes a new view, laced with the personal stories of those who went to fight.

Other things you might like to research are the photos of **Robert Capa**, art by **Picasso** (most famously, **Guernica**) and the writings of **Ernest Hemingway**. The Imperial War Museum has a collection of posters from the war at [www.tinyurl.com/pvs6fc4](http://www.tinyurl.com/pvs6fc4)

## What's on?

Contrasting exhibitions are on in London. **Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear** is a revealing insight into what we can learn from corsets, socks and knickers. Quite a lot, in fact. The exhibition is at the Victoria and Albert Museum [vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk)

Meanwhile the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich commemorates the centenary of the Battle of Jutland. A recent article in the BBC's *History* magazine suggested it was 'pivotal' in winning the First World War. Most history books will tell you it was rather a waste of time but a lot of British ships

showed their design faults by blowing themselves up. You can make your own mind up if you go to Greenwich after 20th May. There is a wide range of linked events and talks.

**The National Theatre** is staging a new production of Brecht's **The Threepenny Opera**. This is on until September but tickets will go very quickly. Written as the Nazi's were coming to power in Germany by Brecht, the play is a vivid account of the underworld, with thieves, corrupt police and plenty of women of 'easy virtue'. Kurt Weill's music is terrific. Mac Heath is back in town.

