
GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

Prospects for a *Bewältigung* of Extreme Violence in Britain's Imperial Past

Michelle Gordon

Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, SE
michelle.gordon@valentin.uu.se

This article addresses how ('selective') British memory has served to emphasize the extreme violence perpetrated by others at the expense of a critical examination of brutalities in 'British history'. Not least, the genocidal violence perpetrated by (British) settler colonisers, as well as the extreme violence that was inherent throughout the systems of administrative colonialism. The 'history wars' in Australia have not penetrated 'British history'. Assumptions are often based on British 'exceptionalism'; an approach mirrored by British memorialisation and museum exhibitions, including Britain's Holocaust Memorial Day and the Imperial War Museum. That the knowledge produced by scholars on the key linkages between Britain and extreme violence is not translating to the wider public, has been demonstrated through Brexit debates. The British Empire has loomed large in these discussions, on all levels of society, and politicians have been particularly willing to use ahistorical narratives to further their causes. The ongoing significance of empire to British national identity has also been demonstrated by recent polls on perceptions of the British Empire. National narratives are currently being confronted across Europe in the face of increased right-wing populism and anti-EU sentiments. In this context, thresholds are continuously being crossed. An example of ahistorical/selective narratives is the British foreign secretary's comparison between the EU and a Soviet gulag. 'Balance sheet' approaches to the Empire in particular have served to continue narratives of British 'exceptionalism'. This crisis or selectivity of memory has brought us to a crossroads. A responsible and critical assessment of Britain's relationship with extreme violence is necessary; we must move beyond a patriotic approach (Drayton).

If we left we would not go back to the world as it was when we joined, still less to the old world of Britain's imperial heyday.

("Why You should Vote Yes" Britain in Europe official 1975 Referendum leaflet, quoted in Butler & Kitinger 291)

The 'multidirectional' ways (Rothberg) in which British history is remembered have been illuminated by the range of debates and perspectives that came to the fore in 2015 related to the Brexit referendum and the subsequent withdrawal process from the European Union (EU).¹ The diverging ways in which British history is remembered and misremembered is notably evident in relation to Britain's imperial past, as the forms of remembrance of the Empire and its violence came to have repercussions in contemporary British politics and society. The British Empire has loomed large in discussions about leaving the EU, on all levels of society, and politicians have been particularly willing to use ahistorical narratives to further their causes. While it is hard to measure the success of these simplistic articulations, it is clear that in the current climate of populism there is a susceptibility to arguments that ignore the realities and legacies of Britain's imperial past. In contrast to Britain, other countries have been engaged in 'history' or 'memory wars' (D. Stone, "Memory Wars in the 'New Europe'"; Moses). Britain has been particularly adept at avoiding a critical assessment on the Empire, preferring to emphasize the misdeeds of others (see Bloxham). This approach has been evident in the country's take on Holocaust Memorial Day, on the memorialization of wars and on museums in particular. In contrast to the common narratives of British 'exceptionalism' and 'moderation', Britain's relationship with violence is far more complicated than is often acknowledged and is certainly not inherently 'peaceable' (Gregory; Jon Lawrence). The narrative goes that the British stand out in contrast to their Western European counterparts for their benevolence, fair play and humanitarianism, as well as other myths that have been long embedded in British society, including the ability of this 'small island' to stand alone in the face of tyranny.

There is a range of popular myths or selective readings of British history that have informed and continue to inform the country's understanding of itself and its history. However, these result not only from more popular accounts of history (Ferguson); some of the problematic misrepresentations of British imperial history are entrenched within scholarly accounts too. For example, in relation to traditions of British warfare, it is often argued that Britain has demonstrated a propensity for moderation related to a 'hearts and minds' approach, which favoured 'minimum force' in both colonial and intra-European warfare (on the latter in relation to the First World War and the 'starvation blockade', see Downes). Indeed, Rod Thornton even puts forward that 'Victorian values' were embedded in the army, as was the British 'gentlemanly' ideal; Thornton also suggests that 'restraint' and 'chivalry' were inculcated through a variety of means, including the British public school system. Viewing the British Army's relationship with violence in this way leads Thornton to claim that the British evacuated the Empire 'reasonably painlessly' (Thornton 99). However, in reality, in both colonial and intra-European contexts, Britain also resorted to extreme methods of violence. In the case of the Empire, we see that Britain has been just as capable as other countries of extreme, even genocidal violence through the actions of British settler colonizers, as well as the brutalities that were inherent throughout the systems of administrative colonialism, such as collective reprisals, including scorched earth and starvation tactics. Everyday imperial life was also permeated with both explicit and implicit violence (Kolsky; Sherman).

¹ From *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a German term coined to denote the country's engagement with its negative past, meaning 'coming to terms with the past'.

In what follows, I will firstly address ideas of 'exceptionalism' related to the British Empire, from colonial conquest to the brutal processes of decolonization. I will also provide a brief discussion of issues related to representations of Britain's role in the Second World War and the Holocaust, followed by an overview of how misunderstandings or the unremembering of these histories is relevant to Brexit debates. I argue that the telling of British history will be critical to Britain's future and requires closer scrutiny in the post-EU referendum world, with Britain's departure from the EU, regardless of the eventual outcome in Britain's changing relationship therewith.

The British Empire and 'exceptions' of violence

A number of countries have sought to 'come to terms' with the violence and contested legacies in their pasts; Germany in particular has been lauded for its so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Nonetheless, Germany continues to grapple with its own nineteenth- and twentieth-century legacies of colonial violence; these struggles with the past have been illuminated by the so-called refugee crisis and recent debates on the 'Humboldt-Forum' for example, related particularly to decolonization and repatriation (Fitzpatrick; Zimmerer, "Der Kolonialismus ist kein Spiel"). In Australia, the 'history wars' have served to highlight the experiences and destructive impact of colonization for indigenous populations (Brantlinger; there are also studies that seek to move beyond this debate – Dwyer & Ryan; Moses). Discussions related to the 'history wars' have contributed significantly to understandings of the genocidal violence that was perpetrated in the colonization of the Aboriginal Australians and their land, although this history remains contested, as ongoing debates related to 'Australia Day' confirm (Coleman).

In contrast to the above examples, despite the scope, scale and global significance of its Empire, the British government has failed to follow suit in terms of critical engagements and public debates related to Britain's imperial past and its wider implications. Linked to this issue is that of apologies, which in spite of pressure from scholars of empire, have failed to materialize (this is not, however, a straightforward issue: Agarwal). Even when individual apologies are made for specific atrocities, these are arguably undertaken to acquire 'moral Brownie points' rather than as part of a wider endeavour to actually come to terms with the past (See, Kennedy 142–3). Scholars are challenging a one-dimensional view of empire and post-colonialism (regarding legacies of anti-imperialism: Gopal; on the problematic legacy of British slavery: Hall et al.). There has been no national debate in Britain related to the genocidal nature of violence inflicted by British settlers on indigenous populations and this issue is treated exclusively as part of Australian history, not British History, with only rare exception from genocide scholars (Lawson, *The Last Man*). The 'history wars' in Australia have not penetrated British 'imperial history wars' (Kennedy), and it is not surprising therefore that this violent history has not seeped down into public perceptions of the Empire. While the genocidal 'potentiality' of the British Empire is absent from most discussions (Levene 52), Martin Shaw has provided an overview of Britain's relationship with genocide, observing that 'genocide was a repeated problem of British – as of most other – imperial and colonial expansions, in which the imperial centre was often, if usually indirectly, implicated' (Shaw 2428).

Until relatively recently, there was a marked reluctance among British imperial historians to engage in discussions of the more negative aspects of Empire. There have been exceptions of course, notably V. G. Kiernan's work, which alluded to the relationship between colonial violence and the devastating World Wars. Kiernan importantly recognized the interconnectedness of colonial violence and intra-European warfare, and observed that in 1914 the 'violence outside Europe was about to come home to roost' (V. G. Kiernan 320). In a range of ways, genocide scholars and historians of empire are examining military and non-military violence, including slavery and indentured labour, colonial legal systems, colonial warfare and starvation tactics. However, this knowledge is seemingly not filtering down to the wider public.

Popular history tends to represent an approach that focuses on the more 'positive' aspects of empire (an illuminating discussion is the exchange between Duncan Bell and John Darwin: Burton et al.; Black). Such interpretations are often linked to a 'balance sheet' approach to empire, as demonstrated by Nigel Biggar's 'Ethics and Empire' project (See "Ethics and Empire"). A key example is Niall Ferguson's work both in print and on TV (Ferguson and the accompanying TV series; Wilson). These representations have contributed to understandings of the British Empire marred by narratives of benevolence and the argument that the British Empire may not have been perfect, but it was 'not as bad' as other European empires.

The aforementioned issues within scholarship and more popular accounts of empire are accompanied by proclamations by public figures who argue the need to be proud of the Empire, rather than ashamed. These include Michael Palin, William Hague and Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown; Brown asserted in 2005 that 'the days of Britain having to apologize for its colonial history are over' (see, Jones), while not actually having apologized. Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May refused to apologize on the eve of the 100-year anniversary of the Amritsar massacre; rather, she expressed her 'regret', as did indeed her predecessor, David Cameron during his time as prime minister (Safi; Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*). Prime Minister Boris Johnson's lack of sensitivity regarding colonial history speaks for itself (Worley). However, rather than empty apologies it is important that we critically engage with the history of empire and improve on inaccurate, sanitized and superficial understandings of Britain's relationship with violence (Schwarz, "Remembering the Imperial Past" 200).

Interpretations of other European empires as more violent than the British are also indicated in an approach that has been described as a 'colonial *Sonderweg*' or 'special path' (D. Stone, *Histories* 237). Isabel Hull's work is central to this approach and emphasizes a propensity for 'final solutions' in German military culture. Fundamental to Hull's argument in relation to the nature of the German imperial military are assumptions regarding Britain's contrasting political culture which, according to Hull, include: the role of parliamentary intervention, strong civilian control of the military and effective public criticism (Hull 184–5). However, Britain showed itself to be just as capable of extreme levels of colonial violence as Germany. Assumptions of 'exceptionalism' are also in evidence in studies of counterinsurgency and decolonization, particularly related to concepts of 'hearts and minds' and 'minimum force' (Bennett, "Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency"; M. Hughes; Thornton). However, there are also scholars who challenge these assumptions (Lieb).

Interestingly, while there has been much resistance to understanding the British Empire within a framework of mass violence, such connections were self-evident to post-war commentators such as Hannah Arendt, whose 'boomerang thesis' suggested important ways in which colonialism 'came home' in the racial violence of the Second World War (Arendt 206, 223). Anticolonial theorists such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. Du Bois also provided damning critiques on the interconnectedness of Nazi violence and the systems of European empires, to which the British Empire was central (Gordon). For instance, Du Bois claimed:

There was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which the Christian civilisation of Europe had not been practicing against coloured folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defence of a Superior Race born to rule the world. (Du Bois 23)

The role of violence was intrinsic to the colonial relationship and experience. Taylor Sherman's work regarding state violence and punishment in India has shown that once colonial rule was established, quotidian violence remained in a variety of forms, 'from firing on crowds and bombing from the air, to dismissal from one's place of work or study, to collective fines, imprisonment and corporal punishment' (Sherman 1). The methods of British colonists often

flew in the face of claims regarding the British 'civilizing mission'. Elizabeth Kolsky's exploration of white violence in India shows how violence was endemic, not ephemeral in the colonial relationship (Kolsky). 'Macromoments' of military violence were of course central to the colonization process and colonial warfare was deemed beyond the remit of 'civilized warfare' and often included methods such as blockades and starvation tactics, punitive expeditions and scorched earth. Colonial warfare was also often a one-sided affair in part owing to the use of modern technology by Western powers (on 'micro-' and 'macromoments' of colonial violence, see Bender; Moor & Wesseling). These methods were justified by Europeans on the grounds of the supposed 'uncivilized' nature of the 'natives', a mindset that was deemed 'necessary' based on experiences such as the Indian Uprising of 1857 – an event that would continue to dominate the British colonial psyche as a lesson learnt in how to 'deal' with recalcitrant indigenes (Wagner, "Treading Upon Fires"). Hence, the realities of colonial warfare were contrary to more traditional perceptions of 'colonial derring-do' and Victorian 'pluck' (Thornton). This was indeed acknowledged by key military theorist Charles Callwell (Callwell).

Colonial warfare needs to be placed within a wider framework of mass violence, rather than being left to 'parochial' military history, as discussed by imperial historian Kim Wagner (Wagner, "Seeing like a Soldier" 25). This includes bringing key colonial and military players into a wider framework that goes beyond a hagiographical approach, such as the celebration of figures including Herbert Kitchener and Garnet Wolseley, who were consistently involved in military campaigns of extreme brutality. Such figures have arguably been traditionally 'protected' within the purview of military history and official narratives (just one example is Pollock). However, debates in this regard are beginning to challenge such perspectives, as demonstrated by the impetus of the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement, which brings into question the valorization of Britain's colonial and military men, highlighting their central role in the perpetration of extreme violence.

The Holocaust and the Second World War

In contrast to British colonial violence, representations and memorializations of the Holocaust and the Second World War have played a significant role in popular British memory and how the country views itself and its history. Not only is the Second World War presented as a 'good war' from a British perspective, with the fight against Adolf Hitler unequivocally a fight to overcome evil, but the Battle of Britain is utilized to demonstrate Britain's supposed innate ability to 'stand alone' in the face of adversity (on the 'good war' paradigm, see Donnelly). A central and enduring component of the 'good war' narrative is that Britain fought the war in order to bring an end to the Holocaust. However, historians have highlighted the ambiguous role that Britain played in the Second World War in relation to the Holocaust (Markusen & Kopf), and the 'good war' narrative ignores the fact that the Allies also undertook actions that were unlawful and led to the suffering of thousands of civilians; these killings were/are deemed legitimate within this context (Lackey; Tomuschat).

The Holocaust has, particularly since the 1990s, held a strong place in British society, to the extent that one can speak of a contemporary British 'Holocaust consciousness' (Pearce). Indeed, it has been argued that the Holocaust has served as a 'screen memory' in Britain, allowing the Empire's dark legacies to be neglected at the expense of the crimes of others (see D. Stone, "Britannia Waives the Rules"). Genocide scholars have raised serious concerns regarding the lesson-centric approach which is taken in initiatives such as Holocaust Memorial Day. The British government's curriculum based on the 'lessons' of the Holocaust argues that studying the genocide encourages greater tolerance, but this approach is not enabling a better understanding of the dynamics of mass violence and the societies that perpetrate it (Bloxham 57; Foster et al.; Lawson "Britain's Promise to Forget"). However, that is not to suggest that organizers' and educators' efforts are not well meaning and this is clearly not

a zero-sum game (Rothberg 11). I am not contending that we should discuss the Holocaust less, but rather that we should discuss and teach British history more honestly and critically. By advocating the Holocaust as an 'unprecedented' crime, British imperial history can be and has been played down. The argument goes that the Empire's misdeeds could not possibly have been 'as bad' as the Holocaust, as if this somehow vindicates the crimes committed. In this sense, the Holocaust has become in some ways a 'comfortable horrible' memory (Edward T. Linenthal, cited in Rothberg 9).

One example of work that highlights Britain's 'complicated' historical record in this regard is the research of David Cesarani. Cesarani pointed to the 'shameful episodes which have tended to be swept under the carpet of historical forgetting' (Cesarani, *Britain, the Holocaust and Its Legacy 2*; Kushner; Cesarani, "Seizing the Day"). These issues include allied aerial bombardment, the failure of the British government to take in greater numbers of Jewish refugees – at a time when Nazi policy remained enforcing emigration of Jews from the Reich – and allowing former Nazi war criminals into Britain shortly after the Second World War (Cesarani, *Justice Delayed*). Hence, the picture is much more complicated than is often presented to the British public. Outlines for a second Holocaust memorial in London present a typical approach, stating that the memorial and accompanying learning centre 'will tell visitors the story of the times we as a country stood up to intolerance and hatred' (Balls & Pickles; Cabinet Office). This wording demonstrates an example of why it is easy to forget that Britain did not fight the Second World War to bring an end the Holocaust. Scholars have also levelled criticism at London's Imperial War Museum. While the Holocaust Exhibition there has been met generally with praise, the museum has failed to engage sufficiently with the 'imperial' nature of British history and the violence perpetrated against colonial subjects, not least related to the dynamics of genocide (Lawson, "The Holocaust and Colonial Genocide at the Imperial War Museum"). As I have discussed, genocide scholars have been exploring the ways in which Nazi genocide marked the 'coming home' of European colonialism and a 'continuity thesis' has also been put forward by scholars including Jürgen Zimmerer, which explores the connections between German colonial violence and the Holocaust (Zimmerer, "Kolonialer Genozid?"). However, if we look to *European* colonialism, as well as nineteenth-century intra-European warfare, we can identify clear traditions of extreme violence committed by Europeans in a variety of contexts – extreme violence that was certainly not 'unique' to Germany (Hull; cf. Kuss). The relevance of the British Empire to these systems of violence requires further research and goes beyond vague, but often proud, claims such as the one regarding the 'British invention' of concentration camps in the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, as noted by Dan Stone (D. Stone, *Concentration Camps* 11).

It is problematic, but telling, that Britain has no museum dedicated to the history and victims of the British Empire, although the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool marks something of an exception (a museum Ann Widdecombe may want to visit considering her analogy likening Brexit to emancipation from slavery: J. Stone). Unfortunately, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol was closed for good in 2009 (Sharp). Hence, Britain is behind the times in this regard. In the United States there are now museums and memorials detailing slavery (the National Museum of African and American History), the National Museum of the American Indian, as well as the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama and its lynching memorial (Levin). There are, however, ongoing contentious debates in the United States concerning confederate monuments, which do link to wider debates on unresolved legacies of colonialism (Bull & Clarke).

The inherently violent nature of empire is also clear in consideration of the processes of decolonization in which Britain's 'dirty wars' were fought until the bitter end and were consistent with the country's colonial approach hitherto (Grob-Fitzgibbon). Further irony has been noted related to British narratives of the Second World War as a moral as well as military

victory, namely that after having allegedly fought the 'good war' against Hitler to ensure 'never again!', Britain went on to undertake campaigns of punitive violence and concentration tactics against entire population groups in the name of the Empire (Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau*; Hack). A 'peaceful' decolonization process is a key element in a British narrative that has endured as part of the myth of a 'benevolent' empire. However, this misperception has been under revision by historians and scholars of counterinsurgency. The impetus for revision was two influential studies: *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (Elkins) and *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (Anderson). Methods of colonial suppression in Kenya included: forced removal, reservations and transit camps, torture, expropriation, the extension of capital punishment and confinement of offenders without trial, all in the name of clinging to the British Empire. The violence of these 'dirty wars' was also placed under the spotlight by the success of the Mau Mau trials, as well as the revelation that key records of British colonial violence were destroyed during the processes of decolonization (Cobain & Norton-Taylor; Kennedy 144). These developments challenged a long-held view on British decolonization, namely, as David Anderson states, that 'the British tend to think they made a better job of it than anyone else' (Anderson 5), notably the French in Algeria. However, according to Bernard Porter, 'Kenya was Britain's Algeria' (Brower; Porter).

Brexit, memories of empire and *British* decolonization

It seems that the British Empire has 'boomeranged' back into public life and political discourse – although it never really went away. The ongoing significance of the Empire to sections of the British public was made clear through its prevalence in Brexit debates. The ways in which the Empire continues to shape public perceptions of Britain's role in the world is particularly striking and also indicates an ongoing nostalgia for empire in some quarters. There is often a failure to grasp the legacies of colonial relationships, as evidenced by the debates related to the former colony of Ireland: throughout the Brexit negotiations, the country has proved to be the crux of the matter, but it was barely mentioned during the referendum campaign. Certainly, among the British public and in the rhetoric of politicians there is little understanding of the history of Ireland as a colony of England or the colonial paradigm (Howe). One example of the wilful ignorance of this relationship was shown by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Karen Bradley in a series of faux pas. These included, in March 2019, Bradley's pre-empting of the decision as to whether prosecutions would be brought against those involved in Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972, by stating that the killings were 'not crimes' ("Karen Bradley Faces Calls to Resign over Troubles Comments"). There seems to be a general failure in the media and among politicians to grasp the true significance of the issue of a hard border (McDonald). Indeed, misunderstandings of Irish history have been prevalent among Brexiteers, as the Jacob Rees-Mogg–Robert Peston furore showed. Despite an apology by Peston in the aftermath, both he and Rees-Mogg agreed during an interview that Ireland had 'undermined' the British government and the issue of Ireland for hundreds of years (McGreevy) – this viewpoint being a highly selective reading of British–Irish colonial relationships (for another interpretation, see B. Kiernan ch. 5). However, that Rees-Mogg has a questionable grasp on nineteenth-century British history should not necessarily surprise us considering his publication *The Victorians*, which was widely derided as 'sentimental jingoism and empire-nostalgia' and with little true interest in the Victorians (Rees-Mogg; Wagner, "Rees-Mogg's Book is 'Sentimental Jingoism and Empire Nostalgia'"; K. Hughes). Individual commentators are speaking out against the traditional narrative related to Ireland, such as Fintan O'Toole as discussed below, and there are historians studying Ireland from the vantage point of colonial history. Several scholars have explored the genocidal relationships that have resulted throughout centuries of this problematic relationship (Levene 48–51, 53–7; McVeigh).

Considering the often simplistic arguments put forward about highly complex issues by politicians related to Brexit and Britain's neighbours, it is perhaps not surprising that sections of the British public have been unconcerned with or unaware of the minutiae of EU debates and negotiations. While it is natural and obvious that there are gaps in interpretations and knowledge between academics and the general public, certain scholars are also complicit in the articulation of mixed messages. Of course, there is no 'one' interpretation of the Empire, but scholars such as Nigel Biggar are not encouraging a decolonization of the British past by discussing 'ethics and empire' – an approach that has been strongly contested ("Ethics and Empire: An Open Letter from Oxford Scholars"). Of course, the whole 'case for colonialism' debacle demonstrates that one need not wonder when the wider public does indeed make cases for empire (Gilley; James Lawrence).

Academics have long debated the impact of the Empire upon the metropole (for an overview of these debates, see Hennessey, "Imperial Ardor or Apathy?"; Hennessey, "By Jingo! Methods for Researching Popular Imperialism"). The ways in which Britain has failed to 'decolonize' has become an important topic in a contentious conversation. Bill Schwarz has discussed this issue within the context of a 're-racialization' of the metropole (Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume 1*). He shows the interconnectedness of racism on the periphery and in the metropole, particularly through immigration from the Empire to the imperial centre. This process elicited anxieties around white masculinity, feelings of white victimization, but also buttressed a sense of white superiority (Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume 1*; Webster). The failure of Britain to decolonize is still being felt across the country; the expectations placed on citizens from former British colonies to 'prove' their right to live in Britain have once again been brought to the fore in the context of the Windrush scandal, affecting British citizens (mainly Caribbean born) and their families (Gopal 20). However, there are attempts to *bewältigen* or 'deal with' this history, as has been shown by recent discussions on Britain's education system (Grindel; Peters), 'Rhodes Must Fall' (Henriques & Abushouk), and the repatriation of artefacts and human remains (Harris; Shariatmadari; Wagner, *The Skull of Alum Bheg*). A number of universities are enquiring into their historical links to slavery (Mullen & Newman), although Cambridge's approach garnered criticism (Neal).

The content of Brexit debates has also demonstrated the ongoing significance of empire to British national identity. Gurminder Bhambra posits a connection between Britain's relationship with the EU and the processes of decolonization. She argues that as a result of Britain having undergone a transition from global empire to joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, the country has not yet had to deal with the transition from global to small state (Bhambra). The country did not 'deal with' the demise of empire, but the implications for Britain's international status were already clear. These were acknowledged in the 1975 EEC referendum campaign, where going 'back to empire' was not an option. Joining the EEC, Bhambra contends, masked the loss of global power and status that came with the concurrent processes of decolonization and the dismantling of empire. Indeed, it has been predicted that Brexit will finally compel Britain to face a 'Dorian Gray-like shockingly deteriorated image' (Dorling & Tomlinson).

The role of the British Empire in justifying pro-Brexit arguments has been apparent throughout the debates. O'Toole has argued that for parts of the political right, Britain's loss of empire has been presented as a process that led to the country becoming an occupied colony, namely as part of the EU (O'Toole, *Heroic Failure*). In this vein, Prime Minister Johnson referred to the terms of May's Brexit deal as those 'that might be enforced on a colony' (quoted in Swinford, "Theresa May's Brexit Plans Will Leave Britain in 'Captivity'"), or as he memorably put it, turning Britain into a 'vassal state' (quoted in Stewart). As mentioned above, concerns of the British becoming the 'victims' of colonialism 'come home' were prevalent in the immediate decolonization period. To avoid this fate, the Brexit narrative goes, the British had to 'take

back control' or 'take our country back' – processes concerned centrally with issues of sovereignty. According to O'Toole, Britain has failed to go beyond a dichotomy of colonizer–colonized (O'Toole, "The Paranoid Fantasy behind Brexit"; O'Toole, *Heroic Failure*). The rationale of such arguments made by the Leave campaign only makes sense based on a 'selective' mis/unremembering of British history in relation to the British Empire – both in its operation and in its demise. Bhambra's interpretation also suggests a lack of thorough decolonization of the metropole. The selective remembering that has taken place, along with a failure to comprehend the colonial legacy, is also evident in the treatment of the Windrush generation. In returning British subjects back to the Caribbean, Britain has resorted to 'deporting' its own citizens, thereby '[p]resenting people as "illegitimate" in order to "take back control" [which] is more than disingenuous. It trades upon racism while simultaneously eliding it. Brexit is what the end of empire looks like' (Bhambra).

Flippant comparisons have been made prior to, throughout and in the aftermaths of the EU referendum debates. One example of an ahistorical narrative is the British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt's comparison of the EU to a Soviet gulag, in response to which it was rightly suggested that he should read a history book once in a while (Rankin). Such glib comparisons betray an insensitive eagerness to instrumentalize the brutal realities of Central and Eastern Europe throughout the twentieth century. The offensiveness of such statements is all the more striking because Britain is traditionally the occupier, rather than the occupied: the 'colonizer', not the 'colonized' (on these categorisations see Memmi). Likewise Johnson's equation of the EU firstly to Napoleon's attempts at European domination and then Hitler's New Order in Europe: the historian Richard Evans has also highlighted the framing of the EU as the Third Reich in new form insofar as it is perceived as a German-dominated entity (Evans). Similar concerns to Johnson's were voiced by Nigel Farage, who spoke of the EU's aim of creating a 'Vichy Britain' ("EU Wants to Restrict Single Market Access to UK"). Links to Hitler's Germany are also relevant to the advocacy of Britain's ability to stand alone – historically against Germany and now against a 'German-dominated' EU. However, Britain did not stand alone, but was supported by the resources of the British Empire, in both lives and materials. Hence, those calling for a return to what Britain 'once was', prior to EU membership, are harking back to a past that does not exist: the argument 'we've done it before so we can do it again' is based on an ahistorical myth of isolationism which 'unremembers' the contribution of colonial subjects, as well as their suffering.

Brexit taps into wider sentiments across the EU and there is a tension between national narratives of sovereignty, for example, and the legacies of the EU, such as the creation and maintenance of stability, by and large, on the Continent (an argument emphasized late in the referendum campaign, Swinford, "Brexit Could Lead to Europe Descending into War"). Of course, people support Brexit for a wide variety of reasons – not least in the hope of engendering change (Dorling and Tomlinson) – but it clearly taps into something egregious too, as the rhetoric of Brexit is supported by a range of troublesome bedfellows (Rawlinson & Martinson). Donald Trump's support of Brexit is well known, although not everyone is so staunch in their position (on Niall Ferguson's change of heart, see Glancy). The current European – indeed, global – political climate, which includes increased right-wing populism and anti-EU sentiments are just one part of the Brexit phenomenon. Brexit has given a voice to Eurosceptics across the EU, but has also bolstered support for the EU project ("Press Release: Despite Record Support for EU, Europe's Voters Fear Collapse"). However, the more extreme elements in Britain that supported and continue to support a hard Brexit include politicians who have repeatedly crossed thresholds and legitimized the demonization of refugees for instance: there has been a failure to hold figures such as Farage to account, not least for his shameful 'Breaking Point' stunt, in which Islamic migrants, it was asserted, would flood the UK should it remain in the EU – a claim which came to represent the distortions of the Leave campaign (Wright).

Conclusion

There have been, however, multiple attempts to 'deal with' Britain's violent past, particularly in the context of the 'post-imperial torment' of being forced to face up to a diminishing role in the world (Ward). These initiatives include 'Rhodes Must Fall' and other calls for the 'decolonization' of education, as well as discussions related to institutions, including the British Museum, returning artefacts to their non-European origins. Some have argued that historians need to avoid balance-sheet approaches, as these serve to enable those who wish to conclude that the 'benefits' outweighed the negatives, thereby creating space for imperial nostalgia, mis- and un-remembering (Rosaldo); what is required, they suggest, are empirically sound studies of the dynamics of empire and violence (Gerwarth & Malinowski; Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*). However, a central problem is that the findings of serious scholarship on the key linkages between Britain and extreme violence are evidently not 'translating' to the wider public, as demonstrated by a poll taken in 2015 which found that only 19 per cent of participants viewed the Empire in a negative light/as 'something to be ashamed of' (Dahlgreen). Dichotomizing pride and shame oversimplifies the issues at hand but, clearly, self-reflection has hitherto been insufficiently undertaken. Brexit debates are one example of the dearth of informed discussions. This lack of self-criticism speaks to a country whose identity continues to be haunted by empire and whose national identity is still based on a wilfully selective reading of that past. As Shaw states,

Not for the British the national self-criticism that produced the German commemoration, or which even in Australia and the US has produced official recognition of crimes perpetrated against indigenous people in the course of colonisation. Not for Britain even the academic debate about our country's relationship to the history of genocide, which has preoccupied intellectuals and scholars in these countries. (Shaw 2418)

Britain is too often presented as being only on the side of the good and as the rescuer/defender of the persecuted – focusing, for example, on the *Kindertransport*. Popular histories, education and memorialisation of the Second World War and Holocaust regularly re-articulate this message. Of course, many scholars *know* that empire-building was brutal and that colonial warfare was frequently one-sided, but empirical studies are still needed to demonstrate the nuance behind this understanding.

As Richard Drayton has emphasized, a responsibility weighs heavily on the shoulders of historians of the British Empire: 'where several generations of Imperial historians evaded and evade descriptions of the dark side of empire, they bear responsibility for how popular historians write about the British Empire and for the attitudes of both politicians and civil society towards the use of power abroad' (Drayton 680). Therefore, we have a duty to articulate an alternative narrative based on archival research that allows for greater nuance in our history and wider representations of British violence. Such articulations need then to be communicated to the British public, in order to engender a more critical and nuanced understanding of Britain's violent past and the implications for a Britain that seeks to 'stand alone' from others. Endeavours in commemoration, memorialization and the approaches of museums will be key in creating the space for a more critical engagement with historical British violence. The apparent crisis or selectivity of memory has brought us to a crossroads. A responsible and critical assessment of Britain's relationship with extreme violence is necessary. We must move beyond a patriotic or nostalgic approach to one that acknowledges the atrocities in an honest and critical manner, thereby challenging official and popular memory (Drayton).

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