



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Political Force of Memory: The Making and Unmaking of Brexit as an Event

Félix Krawatzek¹  and Friedemann Pestel² 

¹Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin, DE

²University of Freiburg, Department of History, Freiburg, DE

Corresponding author: Félix Krawatzek; Email: felix.krawatzek@zois-berlin.de

Abstract

What qualifies as a political event is a core question for social and historical research. This article argues that the use of temporal structures in narratives of political and social developments contributes significantly to the making and unmaking of events. We show how arguments that draw upon history play a particularly important role in transforming the everyday unfolding of politics into discernable events with a clear time bracket. Through this lens, we investigate the 2016 Brexit referendum as an event that has triggered extensive debates about both Europe's experiences of the past and political expectations for its future. Conflicting assessments of history are crucial for understanding how and when Brexit became an event of European significance and why it then ceased to be so. This case also enables us to distinguish more clearly between the agent-centered focus on the event itself, and the analytical ex-post assessment as a critical juncture. Methodologically, the article demonstrates the value of a multi-perspective approach for qualitative analyses with a focus on Brexit narratives articulated across several EU countries and the United Kingdom.

Keywords: European politics; Brexit; collective memory; qualitative analysis; historical event; critical juncture

“Where were you on Brexit crisis day?” asked Scottish National Party MP Peter Wishart in the UK Parliament in December 2018, anticipating that the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union would turn into an event that will be remembered as a critical juncture. Talking about this “most extraordinary moment in our political life,” the *Guardian* quoted Wishart further: “We have now reached the single biggest political crisis since Suez, with the biggest capitulation since Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.”¹ The referendum unleashed an avalanche of press commentaries that combined assessments of the referendum with debates regarding both experiences of the past and expectations for the future. While some

¹“May Roundly Condemned by MPs,” *Guardian*, 11 Dec. 2018.

of these arguments remained, like Wishart's remark, within distinct national media spheres, others traveled across European newspapers. Diverging assessments of English, British, and European history sustained the political conflict between the UK, the EU, and its member states in the run-up to the 2016 referendum, after the Leave vote, and toward the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020.

Studying the historical representations that have made Brexit a "most extraordinary moment" enables two perspectives on the temporalities of events at the intersection of history and social science. First, Brexit became manifest as a political event for twenty-first-century contemporaries through comparisons with the past. The case therefore illustrates what the literature on the temporal structure of historical events (White 1981; Sewell 2009; Dosse 2010; Jung and Karla 2021) can gain if it integrates how memories of *previous* events premeditate the *making* of new events (Erlil 2009). Second, Brexit seems to qualify as a critical juncture from the vantage point of immediate hindsight (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Slater and Simmons 2010). The abundant scholarship on the 2016 referendum and its immediate consequences is a strong indicator for this immediate framing of the event as a juncture (Outhwaite 2017; Buckledee 2018; Martill and Staiger 2018; Sobolewska and Ford 2020). In contrast to such short-term periodization, our focus on the various historical narratives that *make* an event underscores that its meaning is in constant flux, well beyond the immediate moment itself. These evolving narratives shape the political and social thinking of the affected groups, as James V. Wertsch's comparative study centered on Russia, China, and the United States demonstrates (2021). The ways in which an event is narrated and how contemporaries demarcate it from its aftermath over time, conditions whether this event ultimately qualifies as a critical juncture and thereby contributes to the self-understanding of the affected group.

This article emphasizes the distinction that must be made more explicitly between an event and a critical juncture. In our analysis of Brexit, we understand the British referendum and its aftermath between 2016 and 2021 as an *event*, which political and social actors made by drawing on arguments using memory. In our conclusion we assess the potential of Brexit to turn into a *critical juncture*, which expresses an analytical scholarly perspective. Even if the event Brexit seemed over by 2021, when the transition period ended, the question of whether or not it will qualify as a critical juncture remains the subject of ongoing and diverging assessments, given the simultaneity of the end of Brexit and competing events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine since February 2022. These interactions illustrate how contingent the qualification of an event as juncture remains in its aftermath, which Robin Wagner-Pacifici refers to as "restlessness" (2010). Yet, these dynamics are sidelined in the literature on critical junctures.

Brexit represents an excellent case when it comes to understanding both the political and social salience of collective memory and therefore the significance of temporal structures in the making of an event. Interpretations offered by Euroskeptical media and the conservative UK politicians quoted therein made Brexit a significant event already before the referendum in June 2016. Brexit turned into an event as the Leave campaign persuasively embedded the referendum in a historical narrative that saw the British departure from the EU as a logical consequence of long-term historical developments, one that provided a clear orientation for a future beyond that Union. In due course, Brexit turned into a watershed for European integration in other countries, too.

Memory arguments were particularly salient in the making of Brexit as an event that stirred up controversy regarding the redistribution of political authority and sociocultural belonging (Manners 2018; Wellings 2019). The EU's own politics of history, for example the mobilization of the peace narrative, demonstrates that claims to political authority and order during an unfolding event appear particularly convincing if they are embedded in what appears to be a logically unfolding historical trajectory (van Middelaar 2020: 226–51; Manners and Murray 2016). However, Consuelo Cruz's observation that there has been a perplexing "failure to investigate systematically the complex linkages between identity formation and the expressive practices of political actors" (2000: 275) remains valid. Since Cruz made that claim, identity politics and the historical disputes that typically underlie these political claims have evidently grown (Krawatzek and Soroka 2022), but as researchers we still struggle to achieve persuasive analyses of the ways in which historical memory and political dynamics relate to one another in the making of an event.

Intervening in the literature on the making of historical events and relating that literature in the humanities to the social science literature on critical junctures, this article elaborates on three interrelated claims: First, we can better appreciate the dynamics of a political event when we consider how and what kind of memory arguments determine the scope for political statements and, hence, decision-making. Who mobilizes what kind of historical references to provide a meaningful temporal structure for making a political event in the present? The narration of previous experiences impacts perspectives on an emerging event, given the long afterlife of older events, which provide frames and patterns for new topics (Tamm 2015; Erll 2022: 11). Such narratives, by reflecting on embedded memories and social identities, shape what is politically feasible. As cultural and social constraints, they set the rules for the realm of political possibilities (Art 2005; Berger 2012; Dixon 2018). We suggest that a political incident turns into an event as soon as the political present is located against the backdrop of historical experiences and linked to expectations for the future that explicitly or implicitly guide political action (Hölscher 1999; Müller 2002; Jung 2021).

Second, the forms and uses of memory may themselves change during an event, notably through the emergence of new memory actors, their changing positions, and the emergence of competing events. Who has the discursive power to influence when an event is seen to begin or end (Karla 2021)? The structure of these struggles over meaning substantiates memory regimes, constellations that assume the presence or absence of different types of memory actors, as well as the broader political and cultural conditions that those actors navigate (Bernhard and Kubik 2014). By drawing on memory arguments, actors debate the very question of whether a present incident qualifies as an event.

Third, political claims that include assertions about the course of history tend to diffuse beyond national spaces, pointing to the unbound nature of political discourse in moments of reorientation. To what extent does the meaning of an event change when it is appropriated for political claims in different national contexts? How can the same political incident give rise to dissimilar political events across countries or different ideological positions? Events resonate transnationally, illustrating the importance of the media in making an event, the precise framing of which differs from one media outlet and national context to another.

The first section of this article develops a theoretical framework on the significance of memory in the making of events, proposes a systematic way to analyze those agents

involved in narrating an event, and assesses its transnational diffusion. The second section presents our sources for interpreting Brexit as a political event made by memory arguments—namely, press coverage in seven European countries between 2016 and 2021—and our interpretive method of analysis. Discussing our findings in the third section, we analyze the memory regimes prior to and after the Brexit referendum and assess the shifts in political actors and mnemonic rules over the course of that event. Our conclusion highlights shifting memory regimes across Europe, which are key to defining the political event of Brexit. Furthermore, we distinguish between this indisputable *event* and the potential *critical juncture* that Brexit might become in due course and consider early scholarly analyses of Brexit as interventions geared to shaping the future memory as a juncture. We argue that the traditional understanding of junctures, based on a rather fixed ex-post knowledge of change, tends to downplay the extent to which perpetually evolving present appropriations of memories play into the memorialization of political events and thus their potential to turn into a juncture.

The Making of Events: The Role of Historical Narratives

The use of more distant as well as recent historical memories in political and public discourse is an important factor in turning a political incident into a political event. Related to our first claim, we suggest that memory arguments lend a sense of necessity to political statements and, hence, decision-making in the midst of an event. We concur with Wagner-Pacifi's criticism of the assumption that "events being memorialized are finished" (2017: 5–6) and with her call for a processual approach to how we apprehend temporality in relation to political events (see Abbott 2001). Rather than studying how memories of a given past event have evolved over time, we argue that the projection of historical time by analogies, comparisons, or the call for radical change transforms the mundane course of everyday political incidents into an event.

Eviatar Zerubavel presents "time maps" as patterns of constructing historical continuity and discontinuity, of grouping past events for the sake of periodization (2003). For historical arguments about the significance of Brexit, such "time maps" are crucial. Yet, our multi-perspective analysis of the different political, national, and transnational perspectives on event-making demonstrates how contested these temporal narratives are and how incongruous time maps may become, especially when they clash with competing understandings of Europe.

As part of an event, space for radical political demands emerges, and in this context historical statements that previously seemed inappropriate or unintelligible may sustain these new demands. The dynamics of an event, especially a moment of crisis, challenge institutional and discursive norms, leading to changes that persist beyond the event itself. In a narrowing of the room for political maneuver at certain points in the course of an event, path dependencies can be created (Pierson 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). The polarization of the debate around Brexit during Boris Johnson's premiership foreclosed, for instance, cross-party or European-wide dialogue to reach a shared vision about the referendum's consequences as either an exceptional crisis or a unique opportunity. This situation made it impossible to bring the event to a universally accepted conclusion, which might then have created space for new forms of cooperation with partners old and new. Rather, Brexit was

eclipsed by other events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of war in Europe in February 2022.

How the media convey statements by political and social actors and interpret such statements by relating them to historical memories, conditions the political dynamic of events, notably in a moment of crisis, when political parameters are particularly fluid (Cruz 2000; Ewing and Krawatzek 2023). The symbolic meaning-making becomes more persuasive when actors can embed an event in a particular historical narrative, since this forecloses or opens up possibilities during moments of crisis (Basta 2017).

Scholars have looked at the political and social salience of memories in the aftermath of critical events and studied their long-term repercussions in the media or political speech. Peter Verovšek, for instance, conceptualizes the end of World War II as a resource for political transformation, arguing that it paved the way for postwar political integration (2014). Central to such studies is an assessment of how memories of a given event have changed over time. James Mark, for example, presents a decade-long analysis of remembering communism in Central and Eastern Europe (2011), and David Art considers how the dynamics of memory contributed to the shape of state institutions and discourse in the successor states of the German Reich after 1945 (2005). Similarly, Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznajder (2016), Jenny Wüstenberg (2017), and Jelena Subotić (2019) apply a historical comparative approach that offers insights into the reorientation of memory actors and regimes. From a different temporal viewpoint, Astrid Erll (2009) and Christina Simko (2015) demonstrate how memories of past events such as the American Civil War “premeditate” the meaning-making of new experiences providing schemata for the narrative representation of, for example, 9/11.

The theoretical framing of memory as “multidirectional,” “travelling,” or “entangled” draws our attention to the fact that narratives about the past spread from one context to another (Rothberg 2009; Erll 2011; Feindt et al. 2014). Depending on its potential for resonance, such diffusion takes place across time—for example the “Battle of Britain” as an argument in favor of the UK leaving the EU—but also across space. References to the French Revolution by those advocating UK independence are a typical example of how foreign memories taken out of context can be instrumentalized in domestic politics (Adams 2022).²

The unfolding of Brexit as a political event shows how different actors can make conflicting political claims by engaging in memory arguments—both courses of action are more clearly exposed in moments of urgency, as actors struggle to interpret their political present. Related to our second claim, Brexit illustrates the changes in a memory regime, to draw on Bernhard and Kubik’s twofold typology of an agent-centered approach to memory actors (2014). They aim to explain the prevailing memory regimes of a past event by differentiating between four types of actors: “memory warriors,” who draw a sharp distinction between their “rightful” vision of the past and others; “pluralists,” who acknowledge the legitimacy of divergent visions of the past; “abnegators,” who are indifferent to memory conflicts; and “prospectives,” who aim to transcend the past for a better future. Based on the particular constellations of these actor types, Bernhard and Kubik

²“Brexit Is a more Impressive Achievement than the French Revolution,” *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 2016.

suggest that we can characterize memory regimes as being “fractured,” “unified,” or “pillarized.”

Elaborating on the recent encounter between social theory and memory studies (Gensburger and Lefranc 2020), we expand Bernhard and Kubik’s typology for analyzing how memory arguments shape the emergence of an event. In so doing, we follow the path of those who have studied the actors of memory conflicts (Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015). Due to the emergence and disappearance of particular memory actors, memory regimes remain unstable. The shifts within memory regimes redefine a political system’s lines of conflict and also alter the existing equilibrium between memory actors. This may entail a hardening of positions and an increased use of historical arguments. Meanwhile, this visibility of historical arguments shrinks the scope for political arguments, often contrary to the expectations of the actors involved. Political positions underpinned by memory claims are harder to shift, since a change in position would imply the need to reconsider earlier historical assessments that are strongly connected to sensitive questions of identity (Assmann 1995).

The constant changes within memory regimes relate, moreover, to the transnational resonance of memory arguments, speaking to our third claim. Actors react to what they see happening abroad, and such diffusion explains in part why memory regimes may change at a moment of potential juncture. Our focus on how claims by various types of actors are mediated in newspapers emphasizes the importance of agency for transnational circulation (Rigney and de Cesari 2014; Wüstenberg and Sierp 2020; Trimçev et al. 2020). In recent scholarship, the carriers of transnational diffusion have been the center of attention. And while previous scholarship has looked at transnational memory entrepreneurs, notably those active within the EU (Neumayer 2017; Mälksoo 2014), the impact of the media as a crucial channel for diffusing transnational narratives has not yet received sufficient attention.

Recognizing the importance of media in the making of an event increases our understanding of the transnational dimension (Lichtenstein 2016). Moreover, the transnational diffusion of historical narratives is politically salient. In her study of war crimes and genocide in Japan and Turkey (2018), Jennifer Dixon demonstrates the importance of the diffusion of national narratives. She links the intense international pressure put on Japan to the country’s malleable historical narrative, and contrasts this with the lack of change in Turkey. Similarly, in the case of Brexit, actors adapt their argumentative strategies in response to what they see happening in other countries, political fields, or ideological currents. In seeking to understand such moments of political disintegration, it is critical to grasp the dynamics behind the transnational entanglements of memory conflicts, which can provide an impetus for integration in other political fields or in new constellations, like the EU-27. The fact that no institution is formalizing this kind of diffusion highlights the difference between the transnational entanglements of memory regimes and an institution-centered EUniversalism (Nicolaidis 2015).

Let us illustrate our claims about the ways in which memory turns an incident into an event, about the changes of memory regimes during events, and about the impact of transnational diffusion on how we study Brexit as a political event. Tellingly, Brexit started as a British debate, and only in the immediate run-up to the 2016 referendum did it gradually become a European-wide contestation of the past, present, and possible future of European (dis)integration (Cini and Verdun 2018; Vollaard

2018), and thus a European event. However, the emergence of Brexit as a political event was not synchronized, either across Europe or within the UK itself, because the media granted space at different moments to political actors who engaged with the topic. In Ireland, debates began earlier than in continental EU member states, with most parties taking a decidedly pro-European tone (Costello 2021).

In the run-up to the 2016 referendum, memory warriors campaigning for the UK to leave the EU began to push the boundaries of political debate in the UK, and gradually in other EU member states. Meanwhile, Remain-leaning memory pluralists dominated the continental discourse about the UK's historical belonging to Europe. For them, arguments about European history served to legitimize a course of ever-deeper integration through postwar pacification and mutual recognition of a shared historical canon. Unlike this consensual pluralist view, the memory warriors' dyadic understanding of conflicts was granted little public space in continental EU member states prior to the referendum. Given the particular combination of actors at the time, the British memory regime prior to the referendum can be characterized as "pillarized," as the Leave and Remain camps largely ignored one another. The post-referendum period then saw the rapid emergence of an openly fractured memory regime. On the continent, however, a unified memory regime evoking a shared vision of a deep-rooted European history has dominated throughout.

As the views of the EU-27 on the British departure converged, British historical narratives of the UK as different from Europe, and therefore the EU, appeared increasingly incompatible with those in other EU countries, although the UK's historical self-positioning did also inspire transnational debates on the relationship between the nation, Europe, and European integration, notably resonant in Spain and Greece (Núñez Seixas and Manoel 2019; Papadogiannis 2019). This transnational component intensified at decisive moments, such as the triggering of Article 50, and also elections in other European countries, including Emmanuel Macron's 2017 victory in France and that of Italy's populist government in 2018.

By November 2018, once the EU-27 had agreed on the first withdrawal agreement, different British interpretations of its own historical contribution to European history assumed European-wide resonance. However, rather than explaining Brexit, these interpretations were seen to demonstrate the distance between the UK and the EU. Despite such transnational reverberations, continental interpretations simultaneously reassessed and redefined the meaning of European memory, excluding the UK from a European memory framework prior to the judicial exit on 31 December 2020. The end of Brexit as an event was marked not so much by its conclusion, or its memorialization, but rather by the changing hierarchies of urgency in European politics that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods and Data: The Qualitative Analysis of Newspapers

The framing of Brexit in newspapers, social media, and political discourse has played a major role in its unfolding (Koller, Kopf, and Miglbauer 2019; Ruzza and Pejovic 2019). As Matthew Goodwin, Simon Hix, and Mark Pickup show, media framing affected what people thought about the opportunities and risks of Brexit (2018). The polarization of Britain's press largely precluded dialogue between opposing positions, and the BBC interpreted its mandate of impartiality as one in which equal space should be granted to the arguments of each side, leading to an overly conflictual picture of Britain's

relationship with the EU (Berry et al. 2021). Without genuine exchange or convergence between positions, BBC coverage became astoundingly pillarized.

To make political judgments, citizens need an interpretive frame that mediates between the political and their individual world. Particularly for judgments about European affairs, media frames are crucial since most citizens lack direct exposure to the day-to-day activities of European institutions (Strömbäck and Shehata 2010). Newspapers are one such vector and media has discussed the case of Brexit widely across Europe, conditioned by historical experiences and competing future expectations. Meanwhile, the referendum's coverage shifted significantly between 2016 and 2019 (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019).

Given the above, our analysis focuses on a corpus of newspaper articles covering seven EU countries. The country corpora begin in January 2016, after the European Union Referendum Act had received Royal Assent, and end in January 2021, to capture any potential discursive shifts that took place after the UK had left the EU following an implementation period that ended in December 2020. The corpus includes leading national newspapers, to capture the transnational diffusion of memory discourses. The sample reflects national political lines of division that speak to the logic of the respective public spheres.

In the first sampling stage, we identified all articles that link Brexit with narratives of Europe's past (table 1). These are articles that use the language of Europe in close proximity (within a window of five words) to terms such as *memory*, *tradition*, *history*, and *remember* and link these evocations of Europe's past to Brexit. The majority of

Table 1. General Press corpus (The asterisk captures all possible grammatical endings of the terms.)

Country	Newspaper	Articles in corpus	Ideological position within the national spectrum
France	<i>Libération</i>	24	Left
	<i>Le Monde</i>	31	Center Left
	<i>Le Figaro</i>	66	Conservative
	<i>La Croix</i>	19	Liberal Catholic
	Total	140	
Search string:		Europ* near5 memo* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 tradition* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 histoire* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 passe* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 rappel* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 Frexit* near20 Brexit*	
Germany	<i>Tageszeitung</i>	7	Left
	<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i>	10	Liberal Left
	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	15	Center Left
	<i>Welt</i>	21	Conservative
	Total	53	
Search string:		Europ* near5 erinnerung* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 gedenk* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 gedächt* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 erinnern* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 vergangenheit* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 tradition* near20 Brexit OR Europ* near5 geschicht* near20 Brexit	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Country	Newspaper	Articles in corpus	Ideological position within the national spectrum
Italy	<i>La Repubblica</i>	37	Center Left
	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	48	Centrist
	<i>La Stampa</i>	14	Centrist
	Total	99	
Search string:		Europ* near5 memor* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 tradizion* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 stori* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 passat* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 ricord* near20 Brexit*	
Poland	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	15	Liberal progressive
	<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	17	Conservative Liberal
	Total	32	
Search string:		Europ* near5 pami* near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 tradycj* near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 dziej* near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 histor* near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 dziedzictw near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 wspomn* near20 Brexi* OR Europ* near5 przeszł* near20 Brexi*	
Spain	<i>El País</i>	103	Left
	<i>El Mundo</i>	62	Conservative
	<i>ABC</i>	48	Conservative Catholic
	Total	213	
Search string:		Europ* near5 memor* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 tradicion* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 histori* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 pasad* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 recuerd* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 record* near20 Brexit*	
UK	<i>Independent</i>	135	Liberal Left
	<i>Guardian</i>	94	Center Left
	<i>Financial Times</i>	92	Liberal
	<i>Times</i>	159	Centrist
	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	48	Conservative
	<i>Sun</i>	18	Conservative tabloid
	<i>Daily Mail</i>	111	Very conservative tabloid
	Total	657	
Search string:		Europ* near5 memor* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 tradition* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 histor* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 past* near20 Brexit* OR Europ* near5 rememb* near20 Brexit*	
Overall		1,194	

these articles are of immediate relevance to the question of how memory arguments are being used in the political and public arena. While this search strategy privileges explicit representations of collective memory over implicit forms (Erl 2022), this method provides access to the latter in at least two ways: first, the transnational perspective gives

Table 2. Press Corpus Ireland

Country	Newspaper	Articles in corpus	Ideological position within the national spectrum
Ireland	<i>Irish Times</i>	225	Liberal
	<i>Irish Examiner</i>	107	Centrist
	<i>Irish Independent</i>	194	Conservative
	<i>Irish Sun</i>	20	Conservative tabloid
	<i>Irish Daily Mail</i>	79	Very conservative tabloid
Total		625	
Search string:	Brexit near20 memor* OR Brexit near20 hist*		
UK	<i>Independent</i>	258	Liberal Left
	<i>Guardian</i>	253	Center Left
	<i>Financial Times</i>	133	Liberal
	<i>Times</i>	769	Centrist
	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	67	Conservative
	<i>Sun</i>	64	Conservative tabloid
	<i>Daily Mail</i>	329	Very conservative tabloid
Total		1,873	
Search string:	Ireland near5 Brexit AND memor* OR Ireland near5 Brexit AND hist* OR irish* near5 Brexit AND memor* OR irish* near5 Brexit AND hist*		
France	<i>Libération</i>	34	Left
	<i>Le Monde</i>	87	Center Left
	<i>Le Figaro</i>	74	Conservative
	<i>La Croix</i>	31	Liberal Catholic
Total		226	
Search string:	Irland* near5 Brexit*		
Germany	<i>Tageszeitung</i>	12	Left
	<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i>	28	Liberal Left
	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	55	Center Left
	<i>Die Welt</i>	25	Conservative
Total		120	
Search string:	Irland* near5 Brexit*		
Italy	<i>La Repubblica</i>	37	Center Left
	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	17	Centrist
	<i>La Stampa</i>	8	Centrist
Total		62	
Search string:	Irland* near5 Brexit*		
Poland	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	25	Liberal progressive
	<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	29	Conservative Liberal
Total		54	

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Country	Newspaper	Articles in corpus	Ideological position within the national spectrum
Search string:		Ireland* near5 Brexit*	
Spain	<i>El País</i>	65	Left
	<i>El Mundo</i>	127	Conservative
	<i>ABC</i>	25	Conservative Catholic
Total		217	
Search string:		Ireland* near5 Brexit*	
Overall		3,177	

rise to implicit framings—for instance, the common distinction in the UK between “British” and “European” history understood as “continental” history can spark controversy in discursive communities which consider the UK belonging to “European” history as a matter of fact. Second, the use of explicit key terms is often only an indication that the source is of relevance for the study, whereas the actual historical narrative that shapes the meaning of the event is articulated in greater force—and sometimes in more implicit ways—in other parts of the text.

A second sample of articles concerns the “Irish question,” which has emerged as one of Brexit’s major sources of controversy. The corpus in this regard is asymmetrical and includes articles from British and Irish outlets, which link potential historical narratives around Brexit with Ireland. In the Irish corpus this includes any article that combines Brexit with the roots of the term memory or history—these articles overwhelmingly assessed Brexit in light of the implications for Ireland (table 2). In the British corpus we explicitly include the link to Ireland in the search algorithm to ensure that the historical question regarding Ireland is central in the material. Articles in continental media are sampled following a search strategy that permits us to understand the extent to which debates about Ireland have revolved around memory arguments at all, or whether there is a focus on issues such as economic questions or strictly institutional affairs. This latter approach was chosen given the relatively limited debate in continental media over Ireland as well as the less nuanced engagement with Anglo-Irish history.

We interpreted the corpus following a three-step qualitative procedure. First, we focused on the thematic and argumentative embedding of Brexit in relation to Europe alongside a focus on the actors and institutions that made these claims. Second, the discursive shifts over time and the different claims derived from the material for each country were brought together in the form of national analyses. Third, these nation-centered perspectives were assessed comparatively to identify processes of diffusion and argumentative convergence or divergence.

Brexit as Event: Historical Analogies for Rupture, Continuity, and Prospectives

“Taking back control,” the Leave campaign’s promise for a future sovereign and prosperous UK, relied on memories of that country’s past. Narratives about history offered a sense of social belonging and national identity, a Britain “to believe in

itself,” as Boris Johnson would later put it.³ The first part of our analysis identifies a twofold division in the memory arguments in the run-up to the 2016 referendum: on the one hand, a contrast between memory warriors in the Leave campaign, who used nationalized historical references to substantiate the need for a British exit, and the memory abnegators in the Remain campaign, who avoided using history as a political argument; on the other, continental actors, who understood themselves as memory pluralists and showed little interest in, let alone understanding of, the lessons that the British public derived from history. Within the continent’s unified memory regime, there was little legitimate space to question a narrative of successful and ongoing EU integration.

After the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016, the constellation of memory regimes changed rapidly. Conflicts between British memory warriors on both the Leave and Remain sides generated an openly fractured memory regime that hardly left space for shared expectations of a future after EU membership. In contrast, continental media continued to interpret Brexit within the confines of the unified memory of European integration. They focused on the lessons that the remaining EU-27 had (not) to learn from the past.

In the second part of our analysis, we identify three dimensions of change: (i) a temporal reorientation of the UK’s historical narrative; (ii) a spatial re-localization of the UK within “Europe” and of “Europe” within the UK; and (iii) the question of Britain’s relation to the world.

In the third part, we investigate the Irish border question, which turned into a conflict over competing visions of the Anglo-Irish peace process and Europe’s role therein. At the same time, the intractable Irish question points to the ways in which an event ended as competing issues took over the political agenda. In this particular case, this led to Brexit as an event disappearing, raising questions about the conditions under which an undoubted political event may turn into a recognized critical juncture.

An Event for Whom? History Taken Hostage and History Ignored

Once the date for the referendum had been set in February 2016, British media engaged in discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership. Primarily, the Leave campaign mobilized historically grounded arguments, framing a British exit as linearly unfolding the nation’s historical trajectory. In contrast, the Remain campaign did not substantiate its arguments for EU membership by recourse to historical narratives. Focusing on the economic costs of a potential Brexit, Remainers neither emphasized European integration since World War II as a historical achievement, nor capitalized on the UK’s impact on the EU over its more than forty years of membership (Geddes 2013).

In their evocations of the past, the proponents of Leave acted as a combination of ideal-type memory warriors and memory prospectives, justifying their motivations for a future beyond the EU by taking a leap backward. Already, the 1975 referendum that had led to the UK remaining in the EU, had manifested a distinct understanding of Europe, “stripped of a normative commitment to a European idea of ever closer union” (Glencross 2016: 2; Saunders 2018) whereas comparisons with Napoleon and

³“Ar-May-Geddon,” *Sun*, 16 July 2018.

Hitler were already present back then (Gilbert 2021: 116). The Remain campaign's absence from the historical discourse resulted in a pillarized British memory regime as only one side promoted an open conflict about history, which the other largely discarded.

In the run-up to the referendum, the Leave campaign's memory warriors prominently used references to World War II when attacking their Remain opponents (Reynolds 2017). They ridiculed, for instance, the alleged narrow-mindedness of the pro-European elite as a recurrence of the failed appeasement of Hitler: "Just as today's Establishment, with a few eccentric exceptions, will vote en bloc for our further subjugation to the EU, back in 1938 Britain's elite moved as one—in the wrong direction. ... And within a short time their error was brought home to them with the roar of bombs." Journalist and historian Nigel Jones rejected what he saw as David Cameron's attempt to present himself as a modern-day Winston Churchill and instead equated the Prime Minister's behavior with Neville Chamberlain's political weakness. Jones described Cameron's negotiations with the EU as "his own Munich in Brussels, ... promising all sorts of guarantees of British sovereignty that proved equally unenforceable."⁴ In that logic, any integration into EU structures resembled subjugation to foreign rule.

The most poignant example of this oppressive image of the EU was Boris Johnson's accusation of the EU as pursuing a "similar goal to Hitler" in trying "to create a powerful superstate." As memory warrior, the then Mayor of London invoked Churchill and urged his fellow citizens to be, once again, "the heroes of Europe," freeing the country with a vote to leave. In fact, his idea of the UK and Europe being historically incompatible appealed to Leave sympathizers through comparisons. His attack on the EU postwar pacification myth led to fierce contestations across Europe. In Spain, *El Mundo* stressed that Johnson's reference of Churchill had been wrong, since the latter was in fact "one of the pioneers of the European idea," and *El País* quoted President of the European Council Donald Tusk diagnosing Johnson as having "political amnesia." The Polish *Rzeczpospolita*, however, refrained from offering any critique and simply reiterated Johnson's claim about the EU as a Hitler-like superstate.⁵

British conservative media, giving voice to Leave-supporting Conservative MPs and intellectuals, projected the sense of a historical mission onto an EU departure. They foreshadowed independence from a "failing European enterprise" that was not fit for the twenty-first century but, according to Security Minister John Hayes, represented "a 1950s structural solution to a 1930s problem."⁶ Within the historical narrative of a sovereignty that could be regained, the opportunity to vote for Brexit became an opportunity for an ambitious Britain to reestablish its links with the rest of the world, as opposed to restricting itself to Europe. Gradually, the EU was turned into a historical obstacle to Britain's global ambitions, its celebrated imperial legacy and future mission (Deighton 2019). Justice Secretary Michael Gove claimed that Brexit could spark "the democratic liberation of a whole continent" and

⁴"David Cameron Is more Like Neville Chamberlain," *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2016.

⁵"How EU Wants a Superstate," *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 2016; "La histeria, la Historia y el 'Brexit,'" *El Mundo*, 20 June 2016; "Tusk defiende que la UE es 'la única alternativa al caos' del 'Brexit,'" *El País*, 18 May 2016; "Brytyjczyków skok w ciemność," *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 June 2016; on Nazi comparisons on the Leave side, see Stratton 2019: 245–46.

⁶"John Hayes on Brexit," *Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 2016; also "God Backs Leave Vote," *Sun*, 19 June 2016.

presented Britain as having pioneered this form of self-determination across the world throughout history.⁷

The insistence on Britain's extra-European glories rejected the EU's own master narrative of having overcome the logic of violent self-destruction after World War II. For Brexiters, the European peace project became simply irrelevant. Instead, Jewish conservative journalist Angela Epstein reiterated the comparison of the EU with Nazi Germany. She identified EU institutions as the real obstacle to securing post-1945 achievements: "[H]ad it not been for the bravery of our Allies holding out against the Third Reich ... British Jewry would have also been swept up by the systematic slaughter of the Holocaust.... What if joined-up political lunacy ever spread across Europe again? Would Britain be so well-equipped to stand alone were we to be yoked together in an already illegitimate alliance with Europe?"⁸

Analyses of British public opinion stress that "the degree to which citizens hold a European identity affects their perception of the EU" (Fligstein, Polyakova, and Sandholtz 2012: 108). The Leave campaign successfully drew on the fact that Europeanized historical narratives were not sufficiently resonant to counterbalance the ubiquitous references made to national and imperial history. As a consequence, the Remain camp rarely used the argumentative resources available in other EU countries, where the EU had become a "'taken for granted' political authority" (McNamara 2015: 1).

Strikingly, those on the side of Remain did not combine the postwar EU pacification narrative with the memory of Britain's war victory to contest the parallel made with failed British appeasement in 1938. Instead, Cameron restricted British historical agency to reactions to events unfolding on the continent. In a response to Johnson's instrumentalization of history in favor of Brexit, Cameron neglected to highlight British contributions to the European project: "What happens in our neighbourhood matters to Britain. That was true in 1914, in 1940 and in 1989. Or, you could add 1588, 1704 and 1815. It is just as true in 2016." All of these dates—with the exception of the "peaceful" revolutions of 1989—reduced a shared history between Britain and "Europe" to one of warfare. This stands in sharp contrast to the more established narrative of European integration being a peace project (Ghervas 2021). Indeed, the peace motive was a far less prominent motivation for the United Kingdom joining the European project (Simms 2017). Rather, Cameron's bellicose vision proved inappropriate for rejecting the historical isolationism that the Remain camp accused Leavers of exhibiting.⁹ This context made it easy for detractors to portray the EU as a crumbling enterprise from which Britain needed to liberate itself.

Once the referendum was placed on the "right" side of history, the Leave campaign used memory arguments to turn Brexit into a memorable event *before* the vote had taken place. At this moment of a potential redistribution of political authority, Leave outlined a vision of a British future framed as a return to a golden age (Gillingham 2018). This anticipatory historicizing of Brexit demonstrates how the strategic use of memory had an impact upon the temporal structure of Brexit as an anticipated event. Already in May 2016, Johnson foretold that Brexit would be remembered by grateful

⁷"We Meddle in Affairs of Others," *Times*, 20 Apr. 2016.

⁸"Why Europe-Wide Anti-Semitism Is Driving My Vote," *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 2016.

⁹"David Cameron Raises Spectre of Conflict," *Financial Times*, 9 May 2016; see also Baxendale and Wellings 2019: 217–18.

future generations: “Given the choice between taking back control or being sucked even deeper into a federal superstate, the British voted for independence.”¹⁰

Such anticipated memorialization sought to control the contingency immediately before the referendum and those of the required negotiations afterwards. Temporal arguments structured the anticipated watershed moment of the Leave vote by reference to the past, but also already offered a vision to structure its future. It also bore the risk of failure against such high expectations.

Continental media and politicians largely ignored the nation-affirming use of history made by British memory warriors. On the continent, the referendum was a non-event that had to affirm the course of European integration. Meanwhile, discursive alliances between pluralist continental commentators with the British Remain camp’s memory abnegators were impossible. Pro-Remain continental media stressed the negative consequences of what they saw as an unlikely Brexit, a contrafactual aberrance from the historical achievement of European integration. In addition, conservative newspapers, as the referendum drew nearer, defended European unity (Bijsmans, Galpin, and Leruth 2017).

The few continental commentators who anticipated a British Leave vote deplored it for two reasons. First, the traditional British distance from the idea of ever closer integration had left space for alternative visions of European cooperation. *La Croix* provided a forum for British intellectuals, such as Antony Beevor, who lobbied for a more flexible confederation of European nations.¹¹ Taking up this appreciation of difference, the chief editor of *Rzeczpospolita*, Bogusław Chrabota, praised “the breath of freedom that usually comes from the Islands.” He feared a Europe losing touch with British liberalism, falling prey to political centralization and the dominance of the social welfare state promoted by the EU’s “so-called hard core.”¹²

Second, the prospect of Brexit was linked to fears of mainstream politics being radicalized by right-wing forces. In *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, French journalist Thomas Wieder declared Leave campaigners and their continental supporters such as the French *Front National* to be a threat to Europe.¹³ Instead of devaluing the EU as a “superstate,” centrist Italian media emphasized the EU’s historical legacy of securing peace.¹⁴ In this respect, the dominant vision of European history on the continent was largely unified. But since it missed the internal dynamics surrounding Brexit, the dominating historical account failed to imagine that a vote for Leave was in the making.

One dimension of Brexit that both British and continental perspectives ignored prior to the referendum was the problem of there being a post-Brexit border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Brexit meant “UKexit,” putting into question the UK’s inner coherence (O’Leary 2019: vii–xvi). Irish media raised the topic ahead of the vote, concerned about the impact that the UK’s fragile cohesion would ultimately have upon Ireland. From an Irish perspective, nothing was to be gained from Brexit, which posed a threat to the post-Troubles pacification process. In another response to Johnson’s EU–Hitler analogy, columnist Gerald Howlin offered a dystopian vision of Britain falling apart: “Brexit doesn’t quite rise to [the 1940 Battle of Britain], but, for

¹⁰“The Future Is Bright, the Future Is Brexit,” *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2016.

¹¹“Brexit?,” *La Croix*, 20 June 2016.

¹²“Brexit—koniec świata?,” *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 June 2016.

¹³“Europa minus Großbritannien,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 May 2016.

¹⁴“L’Unione europea è quasi come Hitler,” *La Stampa*, 16 May 2016.

its proponents, it is the successor to it. The problem for the union is that Ireland is now almost absent and Scotland can't be conscripted to the Brexit crusade to save Britain again ... Brexit is a complex, multi-faceted distillation, not of Britishness, but of its profound dislocation."¹⁵

Instead of the troubled Anglo-Irish past, the British discourse on Ireland centered exclusively on the potential economic effects of leaving. Moreover, by downplaying the EU's role in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Leave campaigners argued that Brexit posed no challenge to Ireland (O'Rourke 2019: 103–51).¹⁶ Yet, with the referendum approaching, some British abnegators turned into warriors for Anglo-Irish relations within the EU. Remain-leaning media amplified warnings about fragile pan-Irish relations. But memories of deprivation and violence committed against the Irish were unlikely to persuade British voters to vote Remain, since these events seemed of low salience in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Two weeks prior to the vote, however, memories of Anglo-Irish relations did enter the debate with more virulence. Highlighting the thousands of victims since the 1960s, the *Guardian* warned that Brexit would “stomp all over them, suddenly transforming the boundary between Ireland's north and south into a hard border,”¹⁸ and other comments in the British media rapidly connected the referendum to the subject of peace in Northern Ireland.¹⁹

Our analysis sheds new light on the UK's position within the broader discourse on historical narratives of Europe prior to the referendum. The memory warriors of Leave, who sustained a fractured memory regime, dominated debates in the UK, anticipating the vote as a historical event. Referring to traditions of liberty and independence, they offered the prospect of a bright future beyond the EU, while Remain failed to establish a historical narrative concerning Britain's contribution to European integration. For the latter, the referendum represented a historical non-event in which the UK had little to gain if not to keep what it had.

On the continent, the prospect of Brexit left the unified European memory regime unquestioned. Continental discourse was pluralist only by ignoring the consequences of Brexit for European integration and maintaining limited expectations of further integration. From a continental perspective, Britain appeared to be simply one distinct pillar in a transnational memory setting, leaving unified visions of European memory on the continent untouched.

An Event for All of Europe! History as a Yard Stick after the Referendum

On the symbolic level, the day after the referendum, 24 June 2016, represented a profound shift in the relationship between the UK and Europe. While British memory warriors and continental pluralists remained hegemonic after the vote, their narrative in the unfolding event now had to make sense of Britain's future departure. Between the Leave vote and the UK's actual exit from the EU, projecting experiences of the British past

¹⁵“The Real Cost of Leaving the EU May Be the Dismantling of the UK,” *Irish Examiner*, 25 May 2016.

¹⁶“Brexit Won't Hurt Northern Ireland at All,” *Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 2016.

¹⁷“Boris Johnson Dismisses Treasury Brexit Report as False ‘Propaganda,’” *Guardian*, 23 May 2016.

¹⁸“Top Labour Figures Urge Party to Prevent Drift towards Brexit,” *Guardian*, 10 June 2016; see also “Brexit Would Threaten Peace in Northern Ireland,” *Times*, 10 June 2016.

¹⁹“Blair and Major Warn,” *Independent*, 10 June 2016; “Residents on Border Left Fearful of Brexit,” *Times*, 20 June 2016; “Northern Ireland's Greatest Fear,” *Guardian*, 22 June 2016.

into an expected future served Brexiteers navigating the high hopes related to Brexit as a political event against its risks and setbacks. For Remainers, Brexit-skeptics, and the EU-27, pointing to history helped to downplay the rupture of Brexit as a political event with hopes for conciliatory negotiations and unshakeable historical continuities.

For Brexiteers, the referendum required a new temporal order as the Leave vote was the much-expected historical rupture with both EU politics and a memory regime deemed incompatible with Britain's special status. Maintaining high expectations, the Leave vote was placed in a sequence alongside major events in European and British-European history. The *Guardian's* conservative columnist Matthew d'Ancona claimed that "contemporary history now divides clinically into before and after Brexit, BB and AB."²⁰ Brexiteers embraced this rupture as an unequivocal historical achievement.

The subsequent negotiations marked "symbolic moments" in which several parliamentary votes protracted the 2016 triumph, set to culminate in the celebrations of 31 January 2020.²¹ Loading Brexit with expectations of full national sovereignty and a "progressive and participatory democratic alternative to elite-led liberal democracy,"²² they amplified the referendum's impact through references to periods ranging from Antiquity to the Reformation. Tabloids, reporting on how an amateur treasure hunter found a coin from Roman usurper-emperor Allectus, rejoiced at the "first Brexiteer" as Allectus had, in 293, briefly split the province of Britannia from the Roman Empire.²³ For historian David Starkey, writing in the *Independent*, one crucial challenge, however, was the mediocre political personnel: "If only we had Henry VIII to deliver a good Brexit deal."²⁴

Speaking to deep-running social divisions concerning religion in Britain, narratives of the Reformation, interpreted as an act of liberation, could be expected to resonate strongly with parts of the public. The *Daily Telegraph* took Henry VIII's defection from Rome in the 1530s as a model for re-established national sovereignty. While the Reformation stood for liberty, "Catholic Europe," along with "Napoleon and Hitler," ranked on the side of tyranny.²⁵ Indeed, the *Daily Mail* cited former UKIP leader Nigel Farage to proclaim that the UK's exit in January 2020 was "the biggest constitutional change for us since Henry VIII left the Church of Rome."²⁶

Extended UK-EU negotiations and the threat of regional secession in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as the anticipated economic consequences of Brexit, posed questions for the Leave campaign's promise of an immediate transition into a fully sovereign future. Against this promise of Brexit as the culmination of British history, historical comparisons to war and civil unrest conveyed the potential costs, the violence, and the ambivalence that surrounded previous junctures, which got their political salience from the continuing history of conflict.²⁷ The *Independent* informed

²⁰"Boris Johnson Must Work Fast," *Guardian*, 27 June 2016.

²¹"History Is Made," *Daily Mail*, 9 Jan. 2020; "Big Ben Should Remain Silent on Brexit Day," *Financial Times*, 23 Dec. 2019; "She Holds the Key to the Brexit Deadlock," *Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2019.

²²"Landmark Moment in History of Democracy," *Sun*, 10 Nov. 2016.

²³"The First Brexiteer!," *Express*, 5 Apr. 2019; "Brexit, 293 AD," *Daily Mail*, 5 Apr. 2019.

²⁴"If Only We Had Henry VIII," *Independent*, 26 Sept. 2018.

²⁵"The Reformation Offers a Good Lesson for Brexit," *Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 2016.

²⁶"Full Steam Ahead after Brexit," *Daily Mail*, 31 Jan. 2020.

²⁷"Good Riddance to the Latest Rat," *Independent*, 5 July 2016; "Remember Brexit?" *Independent*, 9 Aug. 2016.

its readers that an immense 60 percent of Europe's last five centuries had been marked by war—a rate which, without the EU's post-1945 peace project, would have risen to 70 percent—and that armed conflicts had been “the single largest cause of death for young Britons over the past 106 years.”²⁸ Mobilizing a different set of junctures from triumphant arguments about history, this reversal in the meaning of Brexit underlines the extent to which junctures are constructed in retrospect and that their historical direction depends on the viewpoint of the ongoing present event.

As Brexit became a test of national unity, its political outcomes were both desired and feared. Relating this openness to historical lessons from Brexit, Remain-sympathizers expressed doubts about the possible long-term effects of the referendum. They elevated anti-Brexit demonstrations into moments that could change the course of history and despite the referendum result move it toward “our finest hours.”²⁹ The alleged pro-European attitudes of young voters implied that the UK would ultimately be moving into a quasi-certain future “on the ‘right side of history.’”³⁰

In continental media, the idea of Brexit as an event accomplished by a referendum alone was not universally accepted. Commentators across Europe considered the question of whether the referendum would have a substantial impact on both the UK's position within “Europe” and the place of “Europe” for the UK. For many continental voices, Britain's departure underpinned the continuity of European integration. Neither did they accept the official Brexit narrative of “peace, prosperity and friendship with all nations,” as stamped by the Johnson administration onto a fifty pence commemorative coin.³¹

Centrist and conservative Italian, Spanish, and German newspapers reacted almost as though Brexit would not even happen or, at least, would not impact on established narratives. By insisting upon the UK's inseparable belonging to Europe, these writers believed in Britain's “European vocation.”³² Referring to history, culture, and even nature, outlets emphasized Britain's deep bonds with the continent: “Great Britain stays in Europe: we can discuss history, but not geography,” declared *Corriere della Sera*.³³

Such positions reaffirmed the long-established unified memory regime that took the UK's inclusion in European memory for granted regardless of actual EU membership. Continental discourses discarded any events that might disrupt this regime and thus left little space for a pluralist acceptance of Brexit and for a new temporality of European integration. When the UK failed to leave the EU in March 2019, *Corriere della Sera* dismissed Brexit as a mere “attempt” at overcoming an integration framework that had proved “irreversible in Europe's recent history.”³⁴

²⁸“Brexit Will Ultimately Destabilise Europe,” *Independent*, 5 Dec. 2019.

²⁹“Saturday Will Be the Most Momentous Moment,” *Independent*, 28 Oct. 2019.

³⁰“Richard Branson Calls for Voting Age to Be Lowered to 16 in Wake of Brexit,” *Independent*, 28 June 2016; also, “Why the Germans Do It Better,” *Guardian*, 22 Aug. 2020.

³¹“Win Brexit Souvenir 50p,” *Sun*, 3 Feb. 2020.

³²“Abbiamo fatto la storia d'Europa,” *La Repubblica*, 28 June 2016.

³³“La sfida di Theresa,” *Corriere della Sera*, 10 June 2017; similar “Last Exit Brexit,” *Die Welt*, 25 June 2016; “Reino Unido refuerza su alianza migratoria,” *El País*, 19 Jan. 2018; “Brexit: la nécessité d'un accord,” *Le Monde*, 14 Oct. 2020.

³⁴“La commedia inglese del ministro Grayling,” *Corriere della Sera*, 16 Mar. 2019.

Another variant of this unified vision of Europe acknowledged the EU's split with the UK as a historical event, but predicted that the negative consequences would remain restricted to the UK.³⁵ This “unified minus one” vision of European history removed the UK from the shared horizon of a European past and future with the argument that Europe's “history is not waiting.”³⁶ Such essentialist visions of a British exceptionalism turned the Brexiteers' vision of democracy and self-determination upside down and sustained a split that was irrelevant for the EU-27. Indeed, German memory scholar Aleida Assmann attributed Brexit to insufficient British experiences of twentieth-century authoritarianism: “Great Britain lacked the cement to participate in the European dream of overcoming dictatorship.”³⁷ Agreeing with Assmann, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concluded that the country had been less exposed to the benefits of Europe's “foundational lessons from history.”³⁸

Even in the “unified minus one” mode, the teleological memory of the continent's unification largely ignored Europe's inner heterogeneity that had crystallized around Brexit. A turn toward optimism came with Emmanuel Macron's election in May 2017. The fact of a declared Europeanist taking office broke with the view that Brexit and the election of Donald Trump would most probably derail Europe from its postwar path of prosperity. Commentators stressed the EU's democratic legitimacy, also rejecting far-right comparisons between the EU and the USSR.³⁹ However, there remained a significant gap between the perspective of new agents of European integration such as Macron, who looked for new supranational historical narratives, and that of alternative ancient historical models for reorganizing this process after Brexit. Calls for reorienting the EU along the lines of an ideal-type Greek polis or the protective function of the Roman Empire resonated with left-liberal ideas in the post-Brexit political literature (Nicolaidis 2017; Guérot 2017; Zielonka 2018: 114–33) but were politically unfeasible.⁴⁰

British media shunned the prospect of discussing these EU reform projects, and instead reflected on the country's future relationship to “Europe” as part of (re)opening the UK to the “world” (Hill 2018), with commentators bringing up the tropes of “Global Britain” or the “Anglosphere” (Wellings 2019). Invoking the UK's imperial past, the mental map of “Global Britain” left no space either for memory pluralists or imagining a unified memory regime. When the eventfulness of Brexit was assessed by its extra-European dimensions, the divergent views were located between a pillarized and a fractured memory regime, both of which demanded a separation from “Europe.”

After the referendum, the British government maintained that Brexit presented “an opportunity to ‘think globally’ and ‘lift our eyes to the horizon.’”⁴¹ Prime Minister Theresa May, laying out her Brexit implementation plans to Parliament, saw the UK's

³⁵“Britannien und der Brexit,” *Die Welt*, 11 Aug. 2017; “Britischer EU-Austritt,” *Die Welt*, 29 Mar. 2017.

³⁶“Sans de Gaulle, il n'y aurait pas eu d'Europe,” *Le Figaro*, 11 Apr. 2019.

³⁷“Der europäische Traum ist in Gefahr,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 7 Oct. 2017.

³⁸“Danke, England!,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 Dec. 2018; also Assmann 2018.

³⁹“Non, l'Union européenne n'est pas l'UERSS,” *Libération*, 14 May 2019; also “Malgré le ‘traumatisme’ du Brexit, l'Europe va mieux,” *Le Monde*, 31 Dec. 2020.

⁴⁰“Die neue Hanse,” *Die Welt*, 10 July 2016; “Widerstand gegen Ceta war Brexit von links,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 4 Nov. 2016.

⁴¹“Michael Gove to Set Out Tory Leadership Stall,” *Guardian*, 1 July 2016.

“profoundly internationalist” history as being oriented toward its “global ties.”⁴² However, if global narratives displayed ideas of colonialism, they were bound to lead to strong criticism. When Boris Johnson, as Foreign Secretary, praised the efficiency of running the Empire “with a much smaller domestic population and a relatively tiny civil service” as a model for “Global Britain’s” trade, even the pro-Leave *Daily Mail* turned the now-ubiquitous Nazi references into a critique of British politics: “Would Germany ever pop along to France and say, ‘Hey, remember the Nazis? Well here are some Volkswagens.’ ...why can’t British politicians just shut up about the Empire?”⁴³

As part of May’s pragmatic turn, in which “Brexit” was regarded as meaning, above all, “Brexit,” references to “Global Britain” lost their promise. Instead, the UK dissolved into the prospect of becoming the “bag-carrier” for Trump’s America (Hill 2018) and Brexit being a synonym for “little England.”⁴⁴ The idea of the UK belonging to Europe and the wider world corresponded neither to Leave voters’ expectations of independence nor to the vision of memory warriors seeking to restore imperial glory. In temporal terms, it implied a continuity with the status quo rather than a resurgence of the glory of past golden moments that might be projected into the future. A plethora of British media suggested that Britain reoriented itself toward either the EU or the Commonwealth, the latter of which affirmed an ultimate split from the European memory regime. However, over the various reversals of the post-Brexit negotiations, none of these options materialized. Under Johnson’s premiership, “Global Britain,” for *Independent* columnist Patrick Cockburn, revealed its true character as “self-confident provincialism.”⁴⁵

After the referendum, history-based arguments in British Brexit discourse had paradoxical effects. Leave warriors, insisting that Brexit was now virtually completed as a historical event, had to keep waiting for the triumphant vote fulfilling the promises of historical models such as that of the Reformation, or a return to Britain’s past status as a global power. Meanwhile, darker comparisons with periods of war and violence increased public awareness of the potential costs of Brexit. Nonetheless, this fracture in the British memory regime did not lead to a convergence with unified ideas about the course of European history on the continent. Instead, the UK and the EU-27 drifted further apart on the matter of the historical significance of Brexit. Regardless of whether continental media considered the UK as remaining part of Europe despite the Leave vote, no attempts were undertaken to bring the UK back into this history by recognizing its contributions to the European project. As Brexit discourse affirmed its rupture with European history, British history no longer mattered for the continent.

Ending an Event: Provincializing Brexit

Ireland’s historical position between the UK, the British Empire, and “Europe” sparked open historical controversy (Murphy 2021). Irish memories denouncing a potential comeback of the historical violence committed by the British added salience

⁴²“A Stronger, Fairer and more Global Britain,” *Independent*, 18 Jan. 2017; also “Brexit Explained,” *Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2020.

⁴³“What’s in It for Us?,” *Daily Mail*, 4 Nov. 2016.

⁴⁴“The Myth of Plucky Little England,” *Irish Times*, 26 Oct. 2019.

⁴⁵“The Fiascos Presided over by Johnson,” *Independent*, 20 June 2020.

to the perception of Brexit as an immediately effective political event. Yet, linking with new developments that took place during the 2020 transition period, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and further campaigns by Black Lives Matter, the Irish dimension of Brexit, which only a few specialists were able to fully understand, contributed to its provincialization and to its conclusion as being an event that was losing significance as new events emerged.

The conflictive negotiations after the referendum left no doubt on the Irish side that Northern Ireland and the Republic were facing a threat that could hardly be addressed by the prevailing “carry on” mentality on the continent. Just days after the referendum, the British memory regime shifted in relation to the Irish question when British media projected the troubled imperial Anglo-Irish past into the future. Irish commentator Fintan O’Toole, in the *Guardian*, accused pro-Brexit England of dragging “Irish history along in its triumphal wake, like tin cans tied to a wedding car.”⁴⁶ The *Independent*, meanwhile, linking the question of Northern Ireland’s status to the issue of potential Scottish independence, stressed that the Brexit vote constituted the UK’s “biggest constitutional change since the division of Ireland.”⁴⁷

The Irish border question led to a reversal of the usual constellation between memory warriors and their much less outspoken opponents when calls for Irish unification emerged on the Remain side.⁴⁸ In return, Leavers such as Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers turned into memory “prospectives”: “We have seen all too well how memory can divide. Our ambitious goal ... is to use history to unite.”⁴⁹ The ambivalence of such future-oriented views on Ireland became evident when the Democratic Unionist Party leader Ian Paisley Jr. suggested that the Irish Republic should leave the EU in order to keep the border open.⁵⁰

Irish media dismissed various attempts at integrating Ireland into the new Brexit order. In retrospect, the referendum was a turn toward the worst at a time when “relations between Britain and Ireland never had been better,” thanks to the shared commemoration of early twentieth-century violence (Reynolds and Morin 2022).⁵¹ All the more disappointed after the referendum, Irish views of Anglo-Irish history gained a bellicose mood, emphasizing the deep divide between the “Brexit narrative [as] an English story” and Irish memories of British violence.⁵² Brexit foreshadowed another dark period of history. The split became obvious when Jacob Rees-Mogg deemed the tensions within the Conservative Party the most serious challenge to national cohesion since the repeal of the Corn Laws that had contributed to the nineteenth-century Irish famine.⁵³ From an Irish perspective, these statements

⁴⁶“The English have Placed a Bomb under the Irish Peace Process,” *Guardian*, 24 June 2016.

⁴⁷“Brexit Decision Costs PM His Job,” *Independent*, 25 June 2016; also, “Northern Ireland Isn’t Likely to Reach a Consensus,” *Independent*, 28 Mar. 2017; and “As Article 50 Is Triggered,” *Independent*, 29 Mar. 2017.

⁴⁸“Ireland Faces Partition Again,” *Guardian*, 26 June 2016.

⁴⁹“Villiers: ‘Ties Will Endure,’” *Sun (Ulster Version)*, 29 June 2016; also “Our Bond Will Survive, Vows Charles,” *Times*, 15 June 2018; “Why a Forgotten First World War Shipwreck’s Legacy Can Educate Us about Brexit,” *Independent*, 12 Oct. 2018.

⁵⁰“El acuerdo no es un tótem sagrado,” *El Mundo*, 10 Apr. 2018.

⁵¹“2019 Will Be Centenary Central,” *Irish Times*, 5 Jan. 2019; “Notions of Irish Identity Could Be Broadened Out,” *Irish Times*, 5 Nov. 2018.

⁵²“The Historical Nonsense Underpinning Brexit,” *Irish Times*, 17 Sept. 2018; “We Must not Forget,” *Irish Daily Mail*, 27 Oct. 2018.

⁵³“Bridge-Building Role of Royals more Important than Ever,” *Irish Times*, 21 June 2018.

conveyed the persisting colonial attitude in the Leave camp and reactivated mistrust toward England.⁵⁴

Once the Irish border had become a key issue, memories of British colonialism and the Irish Civil War added salience to the “backstop” controversy.⁵⁵ By unearthing the rifts of the previous hierarchical memory regime, things were now turned upside down. If Brexit was a negative event for Ireland, it was even worse for the UK: the “Irish question” now became the “British problem” and Northern Ireland a “colony” of the EU.⁵⁶ The further momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 catalyzed critical perceptions of British conservative revisionism and also of Anglo-Irish relations.⁵⁷ The status of Brexit as an event that had its own temporal orientation gradually diminished, as competing topics themselves challenged the eventfulness of Brexit.

Irish newspapers discussed Ireland’s past experiences of violence in a way that isolated post-Brexit Britain from the successful path of European pacification history. The *Irish Times* stressed that the Brexit referendum and the prospect of Scottish independence were “two upheavals of the kind that, historically speaking, are typically associated with mass violence.... [The] British think revolutions are bloodless—we know otherwise.”⁵⁸ Within this Anglo-Irish role reversal, Ireland promoted its EU membership as being necessary for peace and prosperity, which consolidated the “EU unified-minus-one” memory regime.

With the separation process set to last “half a decade,” as the *Independent* put it in 2020, Brexit fatigue loomed large.⁵⁹ Rather than being celebrated as a historical achievement on a par with the Reformation or the victory of World War II, or as a breakthrough to Britain’s new global future, Brexit dissolved into lengthy negotiations that centered on Northern Ireland and were eventually overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The separation from the EU exceeded the time span most commentators were willing to accept for an event to last. Though there were hardly any explicit mentions about a “legitimate” duration of Brexit, the clash between the condensed moment of decision—the referendum—and the subsequent protraction of the process were disillusioning. Brexit risked becoming a never-ending process that had a clear beginning as an event but no end.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an implosion of political expectations related to leaving the EU, as it replaced Brexit as Europe’s largest crisis since 1945. The spread of the virus dominated the European agenda, making debates about Brexit seem irrelevant. The changing political reality relegated Britain’s split from the EU to “a pre-pandemic age” (Tombs 2021: 138), changing the narrative structure around Brexit and its status as an event. Without a clear institutional end, Brexit still

⁵⁴“History Shows Backstop Essential,” *Irish Examiner*, 19 Jan. 2019; “Britain Has Not Turned against the Union,” *Irish Times*, 28 Mar. 2019.

⁵⁵“Northern Ireland only a Footnote,” *Independent*, 26 Oct. 2016; also “The Irish Border,” *Independent*, 19 Aug. 2017; “Tales from the Irish Border,” *Telegraph*, 1 Mar. 2017; “Unionists Need Our Reassurance,” *Times*, 13 Dec. 2017.

⁵⁶“Faut-il redouter un retour des violences en Irlande?,” *La Croix*, 31 Jan. 2019; “Le fantasme de la domination européenne,” *Le Figaro*, 17 Jan. 2019; “Saturday Will Be the Most Momentous Moment,” *Independent*, 18 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁷“Airbrushing Slavery and Colonial Violence,” *Irish Independent*, 17 Sept. 2020.

⁵⁸“British Think Revolutions Are Bloodless,” *Irish Times*, 8 Jan. 2019.

⁵⁹“Threats and Bluffs Will not ‘Get Brexit Done,’” *Independent*, 8 Sept. 2020.

became a matter of the past. Chancellor Angela Merkel, during the German presidency of the European Council, raised optimism for the European fight against the virus as “not even Brexit,” she said, had led to the Union’s dissolution.⁶⁰ From the Irish side, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar saw his country as being better prepared to fight COVID-19 thanks to the Irish measures that had already been taken for a “no-deal” Brexit, and suggested that, compared to the bleak times of the Irish Civil War a century earlier, COVID-19 and Brexit did “not look quite so bad, or unique.”⁶¹

In the final weeks of the transition period, leading to the institutionalization of Brexit by 1 January 2021, the Alpha variant of the virus—then known as the “English variant”—alarmed remaining EU members. As all of Europe struggled with exploding infection rates, politicians implemented travel restrictions and border closures relating to journeys both to and from the UK. In a disillusioned editorial, *Le Monde* claimed this situation was “like a Brexit before the hour.”⁶² COVID-19 reduced the historical Brexit moment of 1 January 2021 to one of many experiences of a lockdown. Nevertheless, the fading salience of Brexit in the face of COVID-19 is not to be conflated with a loss of its political importance. From the perspective of historical analysis, we can observe a shift toward historicization, which, retrospectively, could clarify the contours of Brexit as being a critical juncture which would also incorporate further events. However, this potential redefinition of Brexit as a juncture from the vantage point of hindsight would considerably differ from how most commentators beyond the Leave camp perceived the exit process at the time.

Temporalities in the Making of Political Events

This article demonstrates the importance of studying the making of an event through a perspective alert to how the daily unfolding of political life is set in time and relates to competing narratives about history and expectations about the future. This temporalization determines the making of and the duration of an event, as participants in political and public discourse articulate a periodization of the times they are living through. An event is distinct from the everyday unfolding of politics, a “figure of epistemic difference” (Jung and Karla 2021: 82). And there is a broad consensus among scholars since Reinhart Koselleck and William Sewall that an event emerges as a distinct entity in this daily flow through the temporal order that is established through comparisons, differentiation, and notions of repetition. As an inherently temporalizing category, memory is a central tool for understanding the dynamics of an event itself, rather than merely the memorialization of past events.

While there is little doubt that Brexit qualifies as an event, in our view it is more important to understand the formation of the event, and to identify the competing historical narratives at play in the making of an event, than to ponder whether Brexit might qualify as a critical juncture in due course. As we have focused on how an event transforms into memory, we believe that the traditional understanding of junctures,

⁶⁰“La dernière mission d’Angela Merkel,” *La Croix*, 7 Nov. 2020.

⁶¹“The Burning of Cork,” *Irish Examiner*, 2 Dec. 2020.

⁶²“Covid-19: une éprouvante leçon d’humilité,” *Le Monde*, 21 Dec. 2020.

based on the ex-post knowledge of change, tends to downplay the extent to which narratives of past events have a bearing on what can be recognized as a juncture.

For Brexit, we have demonstrated how concurrent and subsequent significant events contributed to the fading and eventual disappearance of Brexit as an event in 2021. Contrary to the resounding victory that the Leave side had promised, it is far from certain how future analyses of European politics will evaluate the impact of Brexit. Thus, interpretations of an event as a critical juncture while it is unfolding are of limited validity. What seems a more likely scenario from today's perspective is that Brexit will be considered in combination with several other events that have taken place at roughly the same time, leading to perceptions of a juncture that is not characterized by one single event but encompasses, for instance, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of populist movements in Western democracies, and the escalation of war in Ukraine. When seen in this context, the imprint that Brexit has made upon European politics looks rather faint, raising doubts about its potential to be ultimately regarded as a distinct historical turning point.

Analytically, this article shifts the focus away from the question of how memories of a past event are negotiated over time and between actors, and instead illuminates the political importance of historical narratives and history arguments in sustaining events as moments of potential change in the making. Relying on the interdisciplinary literature found in memory studies, we demonstrate the dynamic character of memory, the changes of memory actors and memory regimes that lead to a perpetual competition over the meaning of the past. This relational understanding of memory speaks to a glaring gap in the social science literature on identities and politics. Empirically, an analysis of Brexit from the perspective of historical narratives allows us to access drifting memory regimes, while also conveying how they underpin political controversies. Our study traces how the British memory regime, fractured between the memory warriors on the Leave side and the abnegators campaigning for Remain, remained initially distinct from, and later openly critical of, a perceived European model of remembrance. At the same time, however, it also reveals the way in which Brexit has exposed fractures within the EU-27 concerning the lessons to be drawn from it for the EU's future by recourse to historical analogies.

We illustrate that prior to the referendum, the Leave campaign heavily relied upon historically grounded narratives and thereby attributed great significance to the referendum. By contrast, the Remain campaign drew overwhelmingly on economic arguments and failed to change the discursive structure. After the referendum, the available memories and the dominant memory regimes shifted quickly. Three central strands of argument circulated across Europe. First, the need to locate the Brexit referendum in time, in response to which politicians ordered British history in a way that presented the vote for Brexit as the ultimate liberation from the continent and its political project. Second, a reassessment of the spatial relations between Britain and Europe, either affirming Britain's European qualities, with or without EU membership, or dismissing a British departure as irrelevant to the cohesion of the remaining EU-27. Third, an emphasis on the importance of Britain's relationship with the extra-European world in light of imperial nostalgia. As a challenge in its own right, the relationship with Ireland turned into the key controversy of the Brexit negotiations, changing the mnemonic rules in the UK and across Europe, and either warning of a return of historical violence or stressing the EU's irrelevance to the Anglo-Irish special relationship. Alongside the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, the seemingly unsolvable Irish

border question contributed to ending the event of Brexit—not as a clear rupture but as a transition toward new events.

As social scientists, historians, and intellectuals, many of us participate in the debates analyzed in this article, and are increasingly expected to inform public and political discourse as part of our scholarly work. The interventions that academics make, as the rapidly emerging analyses of Brexit highlight, themselves contribute to the making of political events and to shaping how the public is informed about their immediate consequences. At the same time, through our public involvement, we as scholars produce interpretations of events that will become an integral part of the memorialization of the present, even if some of these presentist interpretations already take the authoritative and retrospective guise of explaining a juncture. In an era in which the public voice of scholarly expertise is highly sought after in order to help interpret and understand complex events, it seems important to self-critically reflect on the impact that such contributions have on the making of those events. While scholars enjoy considerable public legitimacy and have an ability to identify, and analyze, junctures and the processes leading to them, there is a tension inherent in public contributions by academics. If done badly, they fail because the unique discursive rules that define research—relating, for instance, to uncertainties, scope conditions, or changing research hypotheses—are difficult to communicate to the wider public. If done well, however, they can inform a public debate about those nuances that challenge dominant assumptions or interpretations that too hastily identify junctures that, in hindsight, turn out to be mere events.

Acknowledgments. We would like to acknowledge the important role played by Gregor Feindt and Rieke Trimcev in the development of the thoughts contained in this article. This text is part of a broader project on European memory that the four of us have conducted for a considerable time, and ideas have traveled extensively between all of us. We would also like to express our gratitude to Matthias Dilling for very helpful comments on this article and to the CSSH reviewers who have taken the time to give constructive and concentrated feedback. All translations are our own.

References

- Abbott, Andrew. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Adams, Tracy. 2022. Reorientation of Foreign Memories in Domestic Political Speech: Considerations and Effects. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, 5: 570–88.
- Art, David. 2005. *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Assmann, Aleida. 2018. *Der europäische Traum: Vier Lehren aus der Geschichte*. Munich: C. H. Beck.
- Assmann, Jan. 1995. Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. *New German Critique* 65: 125–33.
- Baer, Alejandro and Natan Sznajder. 2016. *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again*. London: Routledge.
- Basta, Karlo. 2017. The Social Construction of Transformative Political Events. *Comparative Political Studies* 51, 10: 1243–78.
- Baxendale, Helen and Ben Wellings. 2019. Underwriting Brexit: The European Union in the Anglosphere Imagination. In Ben Wellings and Andrew Mycock, eds., *The Anglosphere: Continuity, Dissonance and Location*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 207–23.
- Berger, Thomas U. 2012. *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernhard, Michael H. and Jan Kubik. 2014. A Theory of the Politics of Memory. In Michael H. Bernhard and Jan Kubik, eds., *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7–34.

- Berry, Mike, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, Lucy Bennett, and Joe Cable. 2021. British Public Service Broadcasting, the EU and Brexit. *Journalism Studies* 22, 15: 2082–102.
- Bijsmans, Patrick, Charlotte Galpin, and Benjamin Leruth. 2017. “Brexit” in Transnational Perspective: An Analysis of Newspapers in France, Germany and the Netherlands. *Comparative European Politics* 16, 5: 825–42.
- Buckledee, Steve. 2018. *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way out of the European Union*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Capoccia, Giovanni and R. Daniel Kelemen. 2007. The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism. *World Politics* 59, 3: 341–69.
- Capoccia, Giovanni and Daniel Ziblatt. 2010. The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond. *Comparative Political Studies* 43, 8/9: 931–68.
- Cini, Michelle and Amy Verdun. 2018. The Implications of Brexit for the Future of Europe. In Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger, eds., *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*. London: UCL Press, 63–71.
- Costello, Rory. 2021. Rally around the EU Flag: Irish Party Positions on the EU in the Wake of Brexit. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, 4: 502–18.
- Cruz, Consuelo. 2000. Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Pasts and Make Their Futures. *World Politics* 52, 3: 275–312.
- Deighton, Anne. 2019. Brave New World? Brave Old World? *Contemporary European History* 28, 1: 31–34.
- Dixon, Jennifer M. 2018. *Dark Pasts: Changing the State’s Story in Turkey and Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dosse, François. 2010. *Renaissance de l’événement: Un défi pour l’historien: entre Sphinx et Phénix*. Paris: PUF.
- Erl, Astrid. 2009. Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the “Indian Mutiny.” In Astrid Erl and Ann Rigney, eds., *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 109–38.
- Erl, Astrid. 2011. Travelling Memory. *Parallax* 17, 4: 4–18.
- Erl, Astrid. 2022. The Hidden Power of Implicit Collective Memory. *Memory, Mind & Media* 1: e14, 1–17.
- Ewing, Blake and Félix Krawatzek. 2023. Critical Junctures beyond the Black Box: Crisis and the Political Contestation of Time. *Journal of Language and Politics* 22, 1: 22–45.
- Feindt, Gregor, Félix Krawatzek, Daniela Mehler, Friedemann Pestel, and Rieke Trimçev. 2014. Entangled Memory: Towards a Third Wave in Memory Studies. *History and Theory* 53, 1: 24–44.
- Fligstein, Neil, Alina Polyakova, and Wayne Sandholtz. 2012. European Integration, Nationalism and European Identity. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50, 1: 106–22.
- Geddes, Andrew. 2013. *Britain and the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gensburger, Sarah and Sandrine Lefranc. 2020. *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ghervas, Stella. 2021. *Conquering Peace: From the Enlightenment to the European Union*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gilbert, Mark. 2021. *European Integration: A Political History*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gillingham, John. 2018. A Speculation on the Future of Europe. In Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger, eds., *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*. London: UCL Press, 193–202.
- Glencross, Andrew. 2016. *Why the UK Voted for Brexit*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goodwin, Matthew, Simon Hix, and Mark Pickup. 2018. For and against Brexit: A Survey Experiment of the Impact of Campaign Effects on Public Attitudes toward EU Membership. *British Journal of Political Science* 37, 2: 481–95.
- Guérot, Ulrike. 2017. *Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss! Eine politische Utopie*. Bonn: Dietz.
- Hill, Christopher. 2018. Turning back the Clock: The Illusion of a Global Political Role for Britain. In Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger, eds., *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*. London: UCL Press, 183–92.
- Hölscher, Lucian. 1999. *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*. Fischer: Frankfurt am Main.
- Jung, Theo. 2021. Events Getting Ahead of Themselves: Rethinking the Temporality of Expectations. *History and Theory* 60, 1: 117–33.
- Jung, Theo and Anna Karla. 2021. Times of the Event: An Introduction. *History and Theory* 60, 1: 75–85.
- Karla, Anna. 2021. Controversial Chronologies: The Temporal Demarcation of Historic Events. *History and Theory* 60, 1: 134–49.

- Koller, Veronika, Susanne Kopf, and Marlene Miglbauer, eds. 2019. *Discourses of Brexit*. London: Routledge.
- Krawatzek, Félix and George Soroka. 2022. Circulation, Conditions, Claims: Examining the Politics of Historical Memory in Eastern Europe. *East European Politics and Societies* 36, 1: 198–224.
- Lichtenstein, Dennis. 2016. The Mental Mapping of Europe: Do Transnational Media Events Matter? In Bianca Mitu and Stamatis Poulakidakos, eds., *Media Events: A Critical Contemporary Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 117–33.
- Mälksoo, Maria. 2014. Criminalizing Communism: Transnational Mnemopolitics in Europe. *International Political Sociology* 8, 1: 82–99.
- Manners, Ian. 2018. Political Psychology of European Integration: The (Re)production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate. *Political Psychology* 39, 6: 1213–32.
- Manners, Ian and Philomena Murray. 2016. The End of a Noble Narrative? European Integration Narratives after the Nobel Peace Prize. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, 1: 185–202.
- Mark, James. 2011. *Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of Communism in East-Central Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martill, Benjamin and Uta Staiger, eds. 2018. *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*. London: UCL Press.
- McNamara, Kathleen R. 2015. *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Müller, Jan-Werner, ed. 2002. *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, Mary C. 2021. Northern Ireland and Brexit: Where Sovereignty and Stability Collide? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, 3: 405–18.
- Neumayer, Laure. 2017. Advocating for the Cause of the “Victims of Communism” in the European Political Space: Memory Entrepreneurs in Interstitial Fields. *Nationalities Papers* 45, 6: 992–1012.
- Nicolaïdis, Kalypso. 2015. Southern Barbarians? A Post-Colonial Critique of EUniversalism. In Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds., *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 283–303.
- Nicolaïdis, Kalypso. 2017. Brexit as Myth: Exodus, Reckoning or Sacrifice. *Standpoint*, July/Aug. 2017. At: <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/features-july-august-2017-kalypso-nicolaïdis-three-meanings-of-brexit-exodus-reckoning-sacrifice>.
- Núñez Seixas and José Manoel. 2019. Spanish Historians and Brexit: On Special Paths and Historical Normality. *Contemporary European History* 28, 1: 19–22.
- O’Leary, Brendan. 2019. *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume III: Consociation and Confederation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O’Rourke, Kevin. 2019. *A Short History of Brexit: From Brentry to Backstop*. London: Pelican.
- Outhwaite, William, ed. 2017. *Brexit: Sociological Responses*. New York: Anthem Press.
- Papadogiannis, Nikolaos. 2019. Brexit from Greek Vantage Points: Changing Histories in the United Kingdom and Greece. *Contemporary European History* 28, 1: 27–30.
- Pierson, Paul. 2004. *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Reynolds, Chris and Paul Max Morin. 2022. Dealing with Contested Pasts from Northern Ireland to French Algeria: Transformative Strategies of Agonism in Action? In Félix Krawatzek and Nina Friess, eds., *Youth and Memory in Europe: Defining the Past, Shaping the Future*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 277–302.
- Reynolds, David. 2017. Britain, the Two World Wars, and the Problem of Narratives. *Historical Journal* 60, 1: 197–231.
- Rigney, Ann and Chiara de Cesari, eds. 2014. *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization. Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ruzza, Carlo and Milica Pejovic. 2019. Populism at Work: The Language of the Brexiteers and the European Union. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, 4: 432–48.
- Saunders, Robert. 2018. *Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Sewell, William Hamilton. 2009. Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology. In *William Hamilton Sewell, Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 81–123.
- Sierp, Aline and Jenny Wüstenberg. 2015. Linking the Local and the Transnational: Rethinking Memory Politics in Europe. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, 3: 321–29.
- Simko, Christina. 2015. *The Politics of Consolation: Memory and the Meaning of September 11*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simms, Brendan. 2017. *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation*. London: Penguin Books.
- Slater, Dan and Erica Simmons. 2010. Informative Regress: Critical Antecedents in Comparative Politics. *Comparative Political Studies* 43, 7: 886–917.
- Sobolewska, Maria and Robert Ford. 2020. *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stratton, Jon. 2019. The Language of Leaving: Brexit, the Second World War and Cultural Trauma. *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, 3: 225–51.
- Strömbäck, Jesper and Adam Shehata. 2010. Media Malaise or a Virtuous Circle? Exploring the Causal Relationships between News Media Exposure, Political News Attention and Political Interest. *European Journal of Political Research* 49, 5: 575–97.
- Subotić, Jelena. 2019. *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Tamm, Marek. 2015. *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tombs, Robert. 2021. *This Sovereign Isle: Britain in and out of Europe*. London: Allen Lane.
- van Middelaar, Luuk. 2020. *The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Trincev, Rieke, Gregor Feindt, Félix Krawatzek, and Friedemann Pestel. 2020. Europe's Europes: Mapping the Conflicts of European Memory. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, 1: 51–77.
- Verovšek, Peter J. 2014. Expanding Europe through Memory: The Shifting Content of the Ever-Salient Past. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, 2: 531–50.
- Vollaard, Hans. 2018. European Disintegration. *Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wagner-Pacifi, Robin. 2010. Theorizing the Restlessness of Events. *American Journal of Sociology* 115, 5: 1351–86.
- Wagner-Pacifi, Robin. 2017. *What Is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wellings, Ben. 2019. *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere: Wider Still and Wider*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wertsch, James V. 2021. *How Nations Remember: A Narrative Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- White, Hayden. 1981. The Narrativization of Real Events. *Critical Inquiry* 7, 4: 793–98.
- Wüstenberg, Jenny. 2017. *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wüstenberg, Jenny and Aline Sierp, eds. 2020. *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*. New York: Berghahn.
- Zappettini, Franco and Michał Krzyżanowski. 2019. The Critical Juncture of Brexit in Media & Political Discourses: From National-Populist Imaginary to Cross-National Social and Political Crisis. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, 4: 381–88.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2003. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zielonka, Jan. 2018. *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cite this article: Krawatzek, Félix and Friedemann Pestel. 2024. “The Political Force of Memory: The Making and Unmaking of Brexit as an Event.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 66: 4–31, doi:10.1017/S0010417523000361