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### **History Education, National Identity, and the Road to Brexit** **Eleni Karayianni and Stuart Foster**

On June 23, 2016, citizens of the United Kingdom voted to exit from the European Union, a move commonly referred to as “Brexit.” The result of the referendum sent shock waves through the nation and had an immediate impact on the international economic and political landscape. Various analysts have suggested a host of reasons for the British public’s decision to leave the European Union, such as general dissatisfaction with falling wages and a declining standard of living, increased political mistrust, widespread concerns over rising levels of immigration, and growing anxiety over a perceived loss of national sovereignty. Notwithstanding these important factors, during the extensive, passionate, and fiercely contested debates that preceded and followed the referendum, it was strikingly evident that issues of national identity were of critical importance. Of significance, during the days leading up to the vote, two of Britain’s most widely read newspapers typically splashed their entire front covers with the British flag and unapologetically used emotive headlines to appeal to nationalist and patriotic sentiment. For example, one urged its readers to “BeLEAVE in Britain” (“We urge our readers,” 2016, June 14) and the other exclaimed on the day of voting: “Your Country Needs You: Vote Leave Today” (2016, June 23). Perhaps not surprisingly, the day after the referendum, one BBC reporter remarked, “What appears clear from the campaign is that the vote to leave was as much a statement about the country’s national identity, and all that involves, as it was about its economic and political future” (Eight reasons Leave won, 2016, June 24).

Other analysts and psephologists have pointed to the influence of particular perceptions of national identity in the referendum decision. For example, a NatCen report on the Brexit vote concluded that “matters of identity were equally, if not more strongly, associated with the vote to Leave—particularly feelings of national identity” (Swales, 2016, p. 2). Relatedly, it is notable that a persistent feature of British public opinion, identified by the 2015 British Social Attitudes survey, was that relatively few people held a strong sense of European identity. Invited to choose as many of the identities associated with Britain and Ireland as they wished, only 16% chose European, a figure that has varied little during the course of this century (Curtice, 2016). Equally, when people were invited to place themselves on a 7-point scale in which 1 means not at all European and 7 means that they feel very strongly European, as many as 27% of respondents put themselves at 1, while just 6% declared themselves 7. On average, people were positioned at 3.2 on this scale, noticeably below the

midpoint value of 4 (Curtice, 2016). Furthermore, 47% agreed that being a member of the EU undermined Britain's distinctive identity. The report claimed: It seems that many do regard being in the EU as a "threat" to what people consider to be a distinctive British identity, perhaps because of the limitations that membership places on the country's sovereignty. Here perhaps is an indication that for many, Europe is an "other" in which they would prefer to be involved as little as possible, rather than an "us" of which they would like to be part. (Curtice, 2016, p. 11) While this finding is certainly not a new or surprising one, the question then becomes how and why British or English identities are shaped in such a way that people living in the UK typically see Europe more as the "other" rather as part of "us."

Understanding how national identities are formed, shaped, and articulated is of course complex terrain and the subject of a rich body of research and scholarship (see, for example, Anderson, 1983; Colley, 1992; Colls, 2002; Gellner, 1983; Hasting, 1997; Hobsbawm, 1990; Kumar, 2000, 2003; Lowenthal, 1991; McCrone, 2002; Newman, 1997; Parekh, 2000; Smith, 1991). It is, therefore, not the intention of this chapter to provide commentary on this important work in all its dimensions. Nevertheless, this chapter does explore the various ways in which education, and history education in particular, may have contributed to anti-European attitudes by emphasizing what Wilson (1998) described as "us versus them" narratives. It argues that history education in England, when the teaching relates to European history, has consistently centered on themes of conflict and competition, themes that have ironically been perceived by educationalists and policymakers not as "difficult history," but as "easy history," as they serve to portray the nation in a positive light and reinforce national self-esteem. Drawing on robust empirical data and documentary research, the chapter closely analyzes how the marginalization of European history in England's curricula and teaching practice, and the striking emphasis on "easy" narratives relating to war and conflict, may have contributed to understandings of national identity that are conceptualized as contradictory or even hostile to Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In overview, it will be argued that the teaching of history in England has focused on negative aspects of its interaction with Europe, emphasizing conflict and competition, and typically portraying the European neighbors as Britain's "other." In direct contrast, aspects of positive interaction, such as efforts for post-war cooperation, have been conceptualized as "difficult," and as such, have been largely ignored. Of course, this is not to say that history education naturally promotes or promoted anti-European sentiment, nor that Brexit was triggered by views learned at school, as this is far too simplistic an explanation for such a complex phenomenon. Nevertheless, a sophisticated analysis of how identity politics, as conceived and enacted in official history education settings, potentially influenced the national consciousness, and by extension contributed to the historic decision for Britain to leave the European Union, warrants careful consideration.

## History Education in England: Aims and Traditions

Analysis of the history of history education in England reveals a complex picture in which competing “traditions” or perspectives prove salient. In overarching terms, two dominant views of history education have emerged during the past 50 years or more. On one side stood those advocates who believed that school history should focus on inculcating young people with universally accepted “truths” and narratives about the nation’s glorious heritage and accomplishments. Despite some exceptions (see Edwards, 2017), prior to the late 1970s history teaching in England broadly followed what Slater (1989) deemed a “great tradition” characterized by its distinctively Anglocentric, nationalistic, and conservative emphasis. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, history teaching and learning was based upon a chronological journey through Britain’s imperial past, with primary focus given to constitutional, military, and political events, the achievements of great men, and the contributions of ruling monarchs (Aldrich & Dean, 1991; Marsden, 1989; Phillips, 1998; Slater, 1989).

In stark contrast stood those advocates and educators who increasingly viewed history as “contested” terrain, in which few absolute truths exist. For them, history was interpretive, complex, and open to diverse perspectives, debate, and contest. According to this perspective, a key aim of school history was the promotion of greater disciplinary understanding. Accordingly, it was argued that classroom activity should focus on historical inquiry, the intelligent discernment and critical application of historical evidence and narrative construction. During the 1970s and 1980s, this radical approach to history education became known as new history. Its proponents believed that history should no longer be viewed as a “received” subject, based upon agreed authoritative narratives, but greater consideration should be given to alternative narratives, and include local, European, and world history (Aldrich & Dean, 1991; Phillips, 1998; Seixas, 2000; Slater, 1989).

A key feature of the vitriolic debates and exchanges that raged during the 1980s between representatives of these two factions was their repeated focus on issues of identity. Traditionalists argued that history teaching should celebrate the achievements and cultural heritage of Britain as a nation in order to inculcate young people with a positive British identity (Crawford, 1995). In contrast, many advocates of new history challenged the notion that a primary focus of history education was to promote what they deemed an artificial and highly selective version of British history and British identity. It was in 1991, in the context of these bitter and controversial debates, that the first National Curriculum for history was published, with the expectation that it would be implemented in every state school in England that year.

The introduction of the National Curriculum for all subject areas, as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act, marked a seismic change in the educational

landscape in England. For the first time in the country's history it was proposed that curriculum decisions would be centrally controlled. Its introduction by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government invited a storm of controversy, and it has been criticized throughout its existence for a plethora of reasons.<sup>2</sup> Despite these criticisms and controversies, the National Curriculum has been established for more than a quarter of a century. The history curriculum has been through four revisions (in 1995, 1999, 2007, 2013), often shaped by the political views of the ruling government.

While numerous studies and academic research in recent decades have focused on analysis of history education, curriculum change and policy development, very little attention has focused on the relationship between history education in England and representations of Europe and European identity. This chapter aims to address this gap by analyzing curricula, textbooks, and teachers' practices. It argues that despite the support of most history teachers, leading professional organizations (i.e., the Historical Association), textbook authors, and teacher educators for the principles and practice of new history and inquiry-based learning, typically this has not had an impact on representations of Europe. To the contrary, the traditional approach still appears to dominate discussions of European history in the classroom by presenting both a narrowly focused "nationalist" history and perpetuating "us versus them" narratives.

## Methodology

The remainder of this chapter offers a close examination of some of the key findings from a comprehensive study of portrayals of European history and identity.<sup>3</sup> While taking into consideration primary curricula, the research was mainly focused on Key Stage 3 (students aged 11-14), because this is the first stage of official education where history is more likely to be taught separately from other subjects, and the last stage at which history is a compulsory subject.<sup>4</sup>

In overview, the chapter focuses on three interrelated aspects of history education: curriculum policy, textbooks, and teachers' practices. First, it begins with an analysis of how National Curricula policy documents from 1991 to the present have included and portrayed Europe and European history. It then moves on to examine 31 history textbooks which were published for the secondary school curriculum within the period from the publication of the first National Curriculum in 1991 to the publication of its most recent iteration in 2013. The study used storyline and content analysis to investigate the manner and extent to which European history topics were included in textbooks.<sup>5</sup> The sample of textbooks was selected from those offered by a range of prominent publishing houses.<sup>6</sup> While some differences exist in the way units were described in each Curriculum, the textbooks selected were relevant to the British history study units (1066–1900) and the study unit on the twentieth-century world. Together these units represented the principal framework in which students were likely to encounter European history at Key Stage 3.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of teachers' practices based on evidence drawn from (a) survey responses from 90 history teachers and (b) semi-structured interviews with 8 history teachers working in schools with diverse populations in London and the surrounding area. While this small-scale study cannot claim to offer a comprehensive exploration of secondary school teachers' practices in relation to teaching about Europe and European history, it does provide useful insights into some of the key perspectives and challenges that surround this important issue.

### Europe in England's National Curricula

Close scrutiny of National Curriculum documentation for history from 1991 to the present suggests that three main issues concerning the treatment of Europe and European history are salient. The first is that the National Curriculum provides limited opportunities for students to encounter European history throughout compulsory history learning in school. The initial National Curriculum document (DES, 1991) prescribed eight study units for Key Stage 3, three of which were of European content (the Roman Empire, the Era of the Second World War, and a study of an episode or turning point in European history before 1914). With subsequent revisions of the curriculum, the opportunities to study European history were reduced.

The latest National Curriculum prescribes only one opportunity to study European content at Key Stage 3. This opportunity is placed under a broad unit on the challenges for Britain, Europe, and the wider world from 1901 to the present day (DfE, 2013). Furthermore, the intentional marginalization of European history can be seen not only in terms of limited opportunities to study it, but also in the isolated and fragmented way in which it was included in various National Curriculum documents. This is the second main issue that the analysis of curricula raises. Typically, students could study the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece in primary school and perhaps briefly encounter the topic of the Spanish Armada or the Crusades in Year 7 and the French Revolution in Year 8. They would almost certainly study the twentieth-century conflicts in Year 9. In overview, therefore, Europe and European history is featured in a very fragmented and isolated manner, both chronologically and geographically. Within such a framework, Ross (1995) appeared justified in claiming:

Europe becomes conspicuous by its absence. The separateness of Europe, its distinction from Britain, is underlined by the way in which most of the National Curriculum is defined to ignore Europe (p. 96).

In direct contrast, the authors of each version of the National Curriculum for history have taken great care to ensure that British history not only dominates the curriculum, but is approached chronologically. The latest primary Curriculum prescribes the chronological study of Britain from the Stone Age to 1066 AD, and the secondary Curriculum continues this trend by requiring the

study of Britain from 1066 AD to the twentieth century (DfE, 2013). The specific requirement for teaching the chronological development of Britain has been a permanent feature of the curriculum since its inception.<sup>7</sup> With such a consciously selective and fragmented focus on European history, it is highly likely that students will finish their compulsory history education with a limited appreciation of the contribution of European citizens to the modern world. The third and perhaps most important issue that emerged from the analysis of National Curricula was the prominence of the issue of conflict. It is evident that on the limited occasions when students encounter Europe, it is often related to some kind of tension or conflict between Britain and its European neighbors. This is particularly illustrated in the way the study of the twentieth century has been framed to commonly include the two world wars, while such topics as efforts for resolution of conflict and cooperation were and still are largely absent. In the first National Curriculum (1991), a key study unit narrowly focused on just the Second World War (DES, 1991).

In the latest Curriculum (DfE, 2013), “Challenges for Britain, Europe and the World” is the only study unit out of seven where there is room to study European history. Here, the document prescribes the compulsory study of the Holocaust and suggests the optional topics of the two world wars and the interwar years, among suggestions that include the study of women’s suffrage, the welfare state, the independence of India, the social, cultural, and technological change in post-war British society, and Britain’s place in the world since 1945.<sup>8</sup> Thus, students who study the two world wars commonly go on to consider other national or global developments, while Europe’s efforts to move beyond conflicts toward conciliation and cooperation are largely unexplored. This preoccupation with the topic of war in the National Curriculum has prompted critical responses from various scholars. For example, the founder of the European Association of History Educators offered a poignant critique of its original version:

What should English pupils know about Europe? The new study programme asks only for the wars of the 20th century. If students study this topic and look in their history textbooks they will receive a queer notion of Europe. The impression given is that this continent is full of wars—the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War—and dictators such as Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler. I must say I would not care much myself about being part of Europe if my only source of knowledge was the compulsory 20th century unit from the curriculum in England (Quoted in Van der Leeuw-Roord, 2000, n.p.).

Furthermore, it is reasonable to claim that the fragmented representation of the history of various countries in the context of war could potentially lead to stereotypical views of other peoples. For example, if pupils only encounter Germany in the context of twentieth-century conflicts with Britain, then, perhaps understandably, they might leave the history classroom with a rather distorted

view about the German people. Rutland's (1999) work supports this claim. Among a sample of primary school pupils, he found a high degree of negative stereotyping and national prejudice toward Germany. In a similar way, Coman (1996) found that primary school children associated Germans with aggression and militaristic metaphors. Goalen's (1998) research with secondary pupils concluded that World War II was the topic that would most likely make children feel proud to be British, and that Germany was the country pupils would least like to visit.

### Europe in England's History Textbooks

To further understand educational policy, the study also investigated history textbooks. Textbooks signify particular ways of selecting and organizing the vast universe of possible knowledge based on what the dominant cultural, political, and ideological groups recognizes as legitimate and truthful (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Berghahn & Schissler, 1987; De Castell, Luke, & Luke, 1989; Foster & Crawford, 2006; Hein & Selden, 2000; Loewen, 1995; Nicholls, 2006; Vickers & Jones, 2005). Thus, analysis of textbook content can tell us a great deal about what is considered important for the next generation to know, and what values and identities are deemed desirable. While we cannot assume what is in the texts is actually taught, or learned, analysis of textbook content provides valuable insights into the tools that influence, enable, or constrain teachers' everyday practice.

The analysis of the 31 textbooks intended for the Key Stage 3 study of history from 1066 to the twentieth century revealed several key findings. First, that during the entire study of British history, there are very limited references and connections to European history. Second, those studying British history from 1066 to 1900 using the sample textbooks would read more frequently about instances where Britain had negative interactions with the continent. So, for example, a typical chronological journey of the last thousand years would include encounters with Europe as "a problem" and feature constant wars with France, the Norman Conquest, religious tensions, war with Spain, and competition in trade and industry as well as competition for colonies.<sup>9</sup> Wars with France are a particularly recurring theme throughout the chronological study of British history. Textbooks commonly refer to this topic but do not typically engage in attempts at explanation. Rather, the narrative is limited to short and simplistic descriptions. The extracts below illustrate a few examples of how textbooks portray European nations in the study of British history:

By 1750, the British and French were the main westerners in India. They often quarrelled with each other and took opposite sides in the wars among the nawabs and the rajans. In 1757, the British came out on top. They beat the French and made themselves master of Bengal (Robson, 1993, p. 10).

In the century or so before 1750, Britain fought a series of wars against other European countries including France, Spain, and Holland. These wars were usually caused by problems and rivalries in Europe. However, much of the fighting took place overseas, where it was possible to conquer enemy colonies . . . Between 1750 and 1815, Britain became involved in a number of European and colonial wars. The main reasons for entering these wars were to prevent other European powers from becoming too strong and to protect British trade (Cresswell, Lawrence, & Dawson, 1993, p. 23).

The Hundred Years War helped create a strong dislike between the English and French . . . The fighting helped to bring the people of England closer together. They were united by the glory of victories such as the Battle of Agincourt and their distrust of the French (Dawson et al., 2014, p. 101).

Britain, as part of the scramble for Africa, was engaged in a competition with other European countries to try to control its best land (Clare et al., 2015 p. 78).

It is true that although most textbooks written since the establishment of the National Curriculum promote a national view of the past, a few offer alternative perspectives. For example, Clare et al. (2014) asked students, “How ‘glorious’ was the defeat of the Armada?” and went on to challenge the traditional “Whig version of history” by presenting “the myth of the Spanish Armada” (p. 130). Despite some exceptions, textbook analysis of the narrative of the British story revealed that very limited connections to Europe are made and when they are made, they usually focus on negative interactions and use a superficial, uncritical, and at times celebratory tone.

Even if the approach of some textbooks has become less overtly nationalistic in recent years, the choice of textbook topics and themes remains largely the same. Thus, students who use textbooks to develop their understanding are unlikely to acquire any meaningful appreciation of Europe other than as a region of close proximity to Britain and an area of constant conflict and competition. Indeed, the contrast with Britain’s European neighbors, particularly the French, may be seen as subtly serving the need of creating an “other” against which the British national identity can be defined and understood.

When reading the textbooks in the sample, it becomes apparent that referring to conflict with England’s European neighbors seems a rather easy choice for textbook authors, as it reinforces particular conceptions of national identity. Serving this purpose, other aspects of history that could reflect badly on the national character are shied away from. One example of how “difficult” histories are avoided in textbooks involves the history of the slave trade. This topic represents a rare instance when the British are identified as European, perhaps in



an effort to share responsibility and dilute guilt. At the same time, the topic itself does not usually receive a lot of attention. Even textbooks that appear more transparent in recognizing Britain's role in the slave trade have mechanisms in place that work to diminish critical engagement with this difficult topic. Wilkes (2014) devotes two pages to "How was Britain involved in the slave trade?"—the same number of pages as topics such as "Blackbeard, the original pirate of the Caribbean" and "Fashion victims." Furthermore, it is revealing that the pages are set within a broader chapter that generally valorizes Britain's empire. For example, the opening statement of the chapter focused on the British Empire unashamedly boasts, "Britain once controlled more countries and ruled over more people than any other nation . . . ever!" (p. 64).

It becomes evident that during the study of British history, textbooks place particular emphasis on a positive portrayal of Britain, not only by ignoring or downplaying aspects of the past that would be difficult to justify, but by focusing largely on the two world wars. After these events, Europe largely disappears from most textbooks in favor of world events and efforts toward European reconciliation and cooperation are left unexplored. So it is within the context of war that the history of Britain is linked with the history of Europe, adding perhaps to students' increasing conception of Europe as a region of constant opposition and conflict.

Another important finding relates to the issue of definition. Europe, as used by textbooks, mostly refers to Western Europe or the "big powers" (e.g., France, Germany). Other European nations appear to be absent. Thus, the embedded definition of Europe within the study of World War I and II excludes smaller European countries, mainly in eastern and southern Europe. For example, only three out of nine twentieth-century history textbooks made reference, albeit briefly, to the Eastern Front in the study of the First or Second World Wars. Apart from a few fleeting references, analysis of the history of Britain from 1066 to 1900 failed to reveal any instance where Eastern Europe was the object of study. It could be argued that this treatment of Eastern (and Southern) Europe has important implications for young people. Given that around 1.4 million Eastern European people currently live in the UK (Travis, 2017), a lack of knowledge about their history and culture could potentially add to feelings of xenophobia, fear, or resentment. Indeed, immigration from Poland and other Eastern European countries has been perceived as a "threat" by Brexit campaigners. Concern over hate crimes against Poles (Silverman, 2009) and the increased level of reported hate incidents in the wake of the EU referendum result (Casey, 2016; Travis, 2016) are not to be taken lightly. This is not to say that limited textbook representations of the people of Eastern Europe have led directly to such crimes, but the lack of attention to, and ignorance of, the history and culture of peoples from across Europe was undoubtedly a feature in the negative discourse leading up to the Brexit vote.

The final, and perhaps most important point, is that after the study of world wars, narratives usually include the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall but do not discuss European efforts for cooperation or the creation of the European Union. Only three textbooks included reference to the European Union, and two of these were ambiguous and awkward. Clayton et al. (2009) devote two pages to “Why did it take Britain sixteen years to join the European Community?” (p. 48), mostly occupied by an illustration showing various groups (lawyers, commonwealth countries, the British public, British farmers, and the Cabinet) pulling Britain away from Europe, and only one person, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, pulling Britain toward Europe. The illustration includes thought bubbles that briefly explain each person’s or group’s reasons for supporting or opposing membership in the EU. A question on this page asks students whether they think Britain has more in common with Europe or with other parts of the world, like the United States or the Commonwealth. The last question focused on the European Union requires students to judge whether it is fair to blame Macmillan for Britain’s delay in joining the EU. Overall, this task makes for a somewhat confusing approach to Britain’s relationship with the European Union.

The second example of reference to the EU was found in Kelly and Whittock (1995). In a chapter entitled “The Changing World,” rather than focus on the development of closer cooperation, this textbook summarizes the uncertainties and anxieties that accompany EU membership in the minds of many British people:

Europe is moving toward integration. The European Union is growing larger and creating a large amount of debate. Should there be one common currency? Will the individual members of the EU lose their own governments and be totally ruled by Brussels? These are questions which remain unanswered (p. 95).

The only textbook to include a straightforward inclusion of the European Union was *Technology, War and Independence: 1901–Present day* (Wilkes, 2015). This textbook includes a two-page discussion of the EU, why and how it developed, and the countries that comprise it. It also mentions the UK Independence Party, and asks students to think about why some people were against the EU increasing its power. Finally, it touches on the issue of immigration and the tension it creates in some communities.

The exception that this textbook presents serves to emphasize the absence in most of the sampled textbooks of any discussion of the development of the European Union. It appears that textbook authors, taking their cue from policymakers, find it easier to focus on conflict than cooperation. Textbooks seem to prefer the safety of established themes and topics, and avoid presenting a more balanced study of twentieth-century relations of European nations that would include both positive and negative aspects. These choices can be said to

have implications for the content that English national identity acquires in the minds of young people.

### Europe in Teachers' Practice

In addition to the portrayals of Europe and European history in curricula and textbooks, this analysis concludes by focusing on the perspectives and practice of history teachers. Survey findings indicated that only a few teachers actually taught European history topics in Years 7 and 8. Most of what was identified by teachers did not concern units themselves, but topics or lessons within units. In other words, teachers mostly detailed instances in which European history encroached on British history (e.g., religious changes in the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth's relations with Spain). There were only a handful of teachers who explicitly taught European history units such as the Renaissance or the French Revolution in Year 7 or 8. Generally the survey findings seemed to verify what curriculum and textbook analyses have suggested: most of the exposure students had to European history occurred in Year 9 when they studied the two world wars. Beyond that, teachers' curricula were heavily oriented toward British history, not only because more topics and time were devoted to it, but also because more importance appeared to be attached to teaching the national story. This was exemplified during interviews with two teachers who argued that "there is certainly no balance between them. We predominantly teach English history" (Lauren, T1) and "in the curriculum, the balance is overwhelmingly toward national history . . . in Key Stage 3 predominantly it's British history and a British sense of identity and a British story" (William, T7).

Emphasis on the two world wars was recognized by some teachers as an issue of concern. Charles (T3) was worried that students leave school without knowing much about Europe and European history other than the Nazis and their crimes. While it is difficult to dispute the importance of these topics and thus their inclusion in the history curriculum, it can also be argued that employing only these topics may create negative images about Europe in the minds of young people. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this is a concern also expressed by various historians, educationalists, and politicians (Coman, 1996; Crawford, 2000; "Don't mention it," 1999; Goalen, 1998; Kettle, 2010; Ofsted, 2007; Rutland, 1999).

One potential way of addressing this concern would be to continue the study of the twentieth century and include the topic of European cooperation after the Second World War. A question in the survey asked teachers whether development of the European Union should be studied in Key Stage 3 history classrooms. A total of 29 respondents agreed with this statement while 43 disagreed (18 neither agreed nor disagreed). During the interviews, all teachers to varying degrees disagreed with including the European Union in their history lessons. The majority said that studying the European Union would be too difficult and too complex for Key Stage 3 students. Some worried that the topic

would discourage students from studying history in the future and have a negative effect on the department. Others claimed the topic was not engaging or too difficult because of its lack of interest for students. For example, David (T5) said that “enjoyment comes into it as well . . . a prime example of why we don’t teach the EU is because we don’t think students will enjoy it.” William (T7) argued:

I think it can be difficult for them to understand and . . . it sounds terrible, there are no wars, there are no big events . . . it’s a series of treaties. I feel that for Key Stage 3 children, it would not be an interesting topic.

Some teachers reasoned that their students don’t feel particularly European, so the topic would have no relevance to their lives. Such an understanding of what is relevant for young people was offered by Albert (T2), who explained that teaching about immigration was conducted from “a colonies kind of perspective because . . . we have more black and Asian people in Britain from the old empire than we do European people.” He added that it would be very easy to include Europe in this study, but at that moment there was no reason to, because “the school doesn’t have any European immigrants.” The choice of excluding Europe in a study of immigration was thus justified as irrelevant to students, despite the large numbers of European immigrants in wider British society.

Even more revealing was that some teachers objected to teaching about the EU because they saw it as a political issue and thus too controversial for the history classroom:

I think if it’s going to be taught, then it is better to be taught through Citizenship rather than through History . . . because it’s a political issue, and history should be about the past, as opposed to talking about things that are still going on (David, T5).

I think at Key Stage 3, probably the wrong thing to do is teach it . . . [it] is a very loaded topic and a very complex topic, and I think teaching it without any politicization would be very hard indeed. Because ultimately you are going to end up either arguing for or against a grand European narrative as a teacher, whichever way you present it (Harry, T6).

It appears these teachers were influenced by contemporary controversies regarding EU membership, and saw any discussion of the topic as too political. However, it could be argued that including the creation of the European Union in the study of the twentieth century does not have to include contemporary political controversies. After all, it is a historical fact. It could merely mean that teachers broaden their chronological focus to include post-war efforts for European cooperation. At the same time, in contemporary democratic societies with strong critical traditions in history teaching, as in the UK, one could expect that controversial issues such as EU membership could be critically approached

with students in history classrooms without the teacher arguing one way or another. However, the very way that these teachers conceptualize the EU as an automatically controversial topic revealed a lot about their own stances, as well as their conceptualization of which history and identities are relevant, or perhaps legitimate, for young people in England to embrace.

In general, teachers pointed to ongoing controversies in relation to European history, European cooperation, and European identity, but seemed to treat these issues as contemporary political questions rather than something that could be brought into the history classroom and problematized. However, they did not object to teaching other contemporary political issues such as immigration, perhaps because they saw them as important social issues with direct significance for students. In direct contrast, they saw Europe as having a limited bearing on students' lives. In general, the analysis revealed that most teachers supported and justified a limited inclusion of Europe and European history in the curriculum. They did appear to accept the presence of European history when it intersected with British or English national history, but for the majority of teachers, it was not a priority. In a similar way, the vast majority of teachers eschewed the notion that the history classroom should be a place where issues of European identity can be discussed.

## Conclusion

This chapter began by recognizing that the UK's closely contested but decisive vote to leave the European Union was motivated by a complex combination of factors. Arguably, one of the most influential factors was the way in which many voters construed and constructed notions of national identity. Throughout the referendum campaign, it was strikingly evident that "Brexiters" were alarmed by what they perceived as damaging European regulations, continental meddling, and the pernicious threat of unbridled immigration. In the debates and arguments that raged in the months leading up to the referendum, those voting to leave typically viewed their continental neighbors as a negative "other," to be treated with suspicion and disdain. In this atmosphere, Euroskeptics became intoxicated by the rallying cry of "take back control" of Britain's borders, laws, economy, and most importantly, its national identity. Undeterred by the complexity of forging what Benedict Anderson famously termed an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983), Brexiters simply presented European policy and practices as antithetical to British values and a British way of life.

Throughout the Leave campaign, Europe and the idea of European identity were presented as problems, threats, and challenges to British identity. At its most basic level, those who campaigned to leave the EU appeared to tap into something visceral in British and/or English consciousness—namely, an instinctive distrust of Europe and the European project. Understanding the various complex cultural and socioeconomic forces that have an impact on a nation's collective consciousness is of course a hugely complicated business. It

is, however, not unreasonable to assume that the education system, and history education in particular, played a part in shaping how British citizens view themselves and the world.

In this respect, the analysis presented here of national curriculum documents, school history textbooks, and teachers' practices offers substantial evidence for how Europe and European history have been portrayed in negative terms. The National Curriculum, which has endured for more than a quarter of a century, has often marginalized and underrepresented the history of the continent and its peoples. In a similar vein, school history textbooks have habitually presented Europe as Britain's "other," and emphasized events focused on conflict, war, and rivalry over peace, reconciliation, and collaboration. While the majority of history teachers could not be construed as anti-European, most do not believe European history should take precedence, and few share the view that European identity should be discussed in their classes. As stated at the outset, such compelling evidence cannot be used to advance the simple argument that history education alone influenced a country's decision to leave the European Union. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the negative portrayals of Europe presented in history classrooms for many decades might have unwittingly contributed to the momentous result.

The intriguing relationship between history education in England and the UK's dramatic decision to leave the European Union has potentially significant implications for those involved in history education and history education research across the world. Two observations warrant particular consideration. This chapter underscores the problem of conceptualizing "difficult" history in narrow and limited ways. As illustrated throughout, it is evident that in a UK-EU context, "difficult" history was not concerned with conflict and confrontation (this was "easy" history), but rather, narratives featuring collaboration and cooperation. Accordingly, researchers engaged in investigating "difficult" histories must be prepared to explore the phenomenon in all its complexity. In a related fashion, history education researchers would be advised to consider not only what histories remain dominant and explicit, but also those that appear silent or absent. What this study of curriculum, textbooks, and practice in England has shown is the alarming absence of narratives that portray consensus, collaboration, shared values, and a common history among the European people. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the overtly negative conception of Europe commonly presented in history education in England might have both fueled and reflected wider concerns and fears circulating among British citizens who dramatically voted to leave the European Union in June 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> The decision to leave the European Union resulted from a referendum held in all countries within the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), therefore, references are made to the collective term “Britain” or the “United Kingdom” when referring to the political context. However, in education, each of these countries has its own system. Analysis in this chapter is focused only on England, the largest of the systems.

<sup>2</sup> As a result of the Academies Act of 2010, schools were encouraged to apply to become academies. At the time of writing, approximately 60% of secondary schools in England are now academies. Academies are publicly funded state schools, independent of central control, they don’t have to follow the National Curriculum. However, there is evidence to suggest that many academies still implement the National Curriculum.

<sup>3</sup> Part of a Ph.D. thesis which was completed in 2012 (Karayianni, 2012). It was updated in 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The English education system is structured into several stages. Key Stage 1: first two years of primary education, students are typically aged between 5 and 6. Key Stage 2: the next four years of primary education, students are aged 7 to 11. Key Stage 3: the first three years of secondary education, students are aged between 11 and 14.

<sup>5</sup> Textbook use is not compulsory in England. However, there is evidence that their use is widespread. Teachers may choose textbooks from a free market of textbook publishers.

<sup>6</sup> Publishing houses included in the sample were: Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Heinemann, Longman, Collins Educational and Hodder Murray.

<sup>7</sup> The NC2007 for Key Stage 3 could be said to present a deviation from this chronological approach as it presented teachers with themes rather than units. Themes under British history included the development of political power from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, but also issues with less rigid chronological frames, such as “the different histories and changing relationship through time of the peoples of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales” (QCA, 2007). Themes were removed in the latest revision of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), which returned to a stricter chronological approach.

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- <sup>8</sup> The full list of suggested topics under this unit includes: women’s suffrage, the First World War and the Peace Settlement, the interwar years: the Great Depression and the rise of dictators, the Second World War and the wartime leadership of Winston Churchill, the creation of the Welfare State, Indian independence and end of Empire, social, cultural, and technological change in post-war British society, and Britain’s place in the world since 1945 (DfE, 2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Some textbooks published after the latest curriculum portray the interaction of Britain with Europe in more positive terms by discussing the various invasions of European settlers before 1066 and the way they have impacted Britain. In most instances Europe continues to be mentioned within the context of war and rivalry.