

Brexit and its importance in the cycle of history

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It is in difficult times that leaders' skills are tested. Today is effectively make or break for Theresa May in getting the Brexit 'deal' that she has, it is speculated, pretty much agreed with the EU negotiators. If ever there was a time that she needed to demonstrate her mettle and ability to influence, this is her moment. If she achieves success, her place in history in dealing with, arguably, the most difficult issue for generations will be secure. Failure for May will have negative consequences not just on her, but have a profound effect on the UK economy. The stakes could not be higher.

Winston Churchill's inspirational speeches during the second world war ensured that there was resolved amongst parliament and the people in the face of the monstrous Nazi regime under Hitler. Notably, it is mistakenly believed, Churchill was responsible for the line that "History is written by the victors" Though it is far from certain, the quote is believed to have originated from Hermann Göring's quote that "We will go down in history either as the world's greatest statesmen or its worst villains."

History, rightly, does not judge the Nazis well. However, seminal historians recognise whatever we think of Hitler and the Nazis there were particular reasons why they came to rule over Germany and created the utter mayhem that resulted in six years of war. Any balanced analysis must take into account the mindsets and attitudes that prevailed amongst all involved. In the case of Germany, the origins were political and economic (see Laurence Rees' *The Nazis, A Warning from History* published in 1998 which is based on the BBC television series that is disturbing in the way that Hitler, a peculiar icon of evil, employed his oratory skills and charisma to mesmerise the German people.

In reflecting on Brexit, one wonders what future generations will make of the process? How will historians judge the way in which we are currently in a situation in which, it seems, there is almost no possibility

of reaching an agreement that will satisfy all sides economically and, equally importantly, politically? Brexit has exposed chasms in society that may take generations to heal regardless of whatever deal is eventually agreed and may lead to the breakup of the union. Brexit is surely an example par excellence of the paradox of unintended consequences.

Regrettably, the Brexit process was created by, and continues to allow, the peddling of ill-informed arguments feeding age-old enmities and prejudices. And though the economic perspectives of any potential deal are undoubtedly crucial to future success and prosperity, of equal criticality must be the peace in western Europe that that has, largely, been enjoyed since 1945 when Hitler's odious rule over Germany ended and it became explicitly clear to all what the reality of life under the Nazis meant.

Last weekend's remembrance services, justifiably, focused on those who bravely fought for their countries on all sides. But in any conflict civilians also suffer. In the two world wars the numbers who died are simply mind-numbing; 20 million in the first and an estimated 80 million deaths in the second. That the overwhelming majority of deaths in the second world war were civilians absolutely emphasises Churchill's famous maxim that "jaw-jaw is better than war-war".

Any failure in the Brexit negotiations, most especially a so called 'no deal', will not result in war. However, as cursory reading of the history tells us, making people poorer creates an environment of resentment that may make it more likely. This was the case in Germany. The signing of the armistice in the railway carriage in the Forest of Compiègne on the 11th November that led to the end of hostilities six hours later at eleven o'clock, and which resulted in Treaty of Versailles in 1919, sowed the seeds of economic chaos and bitterness in Germany that led to the rise of the Nazis.

Germans believed that the Treaty, something they had not been allowed to participate in, was a humiliation. Germany, having been required under the terms of the Versailles to pay £6,600 million in 'reparations', caused dramatic economic decline, hyperinflation and starvation. Such was the ripe environment that enabled Hitler and his backers in the Nazi Party to proffer simplistic solutions. In the madness that ensued, their claim that Germany's woes were part of a

ludicrous plot by Jews allowed the murderous extermination of over six million innocent people whose fate symbolises the barbarity of the conflict.

Economics are crucial to any sense of well-being and peace; see *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* written in 1919 by British economist John Maynard Keynes who attended the Versailles Peace Conference as a delegate of the British Treasury. The deal that Theresa May is attempting to achieve agreement on must both acknowledge the sense of disillusionment that created resentment of Europe and loss of jobs that led to Brexit whilst ensuring that future prosperity and investment is protected and, of course, enhanced. As commentators assert, this really is a case of 'squaring the circle'. Nonetheless, it behoves those who argue that 'no deal' is better than any deal to recall how significantly Europe's fortunes impact on ours.

The consequences of a 'no deal' are well documented and could lead to the widespread loss of jobs in all sectors; most especially among automotive producers. There is likely to be any eye-watering drop in GDP. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, the politically independent economic analysts, suggest the effects of leaving the EU with no deal would be similar to the 'three day week' of 1974 caused by coal shortages resulting from industrial action by miners. Given that the UK economy remains weakened following the GFC ten years ago, any further undermining would represent further woes for hard-pressed businesses and the people they employ,

History demonstrates that poor short-term agreements do not end well. Theresa May's attempts to look beyond the emotions that drove the leave vote are well-intentioned and should be supported as providing the best possible long-term outcomes for jobs and prosperity. That the deal that has been agreed with the EU is unlikely to be accepted by Brexiteers is unsurprising.

Worse, though, anything that means that Northern Ireland remains in the EU, essential to the continuance of the 'Good Friday agreement', will mean that Unionists, especially the Democratic Unionist Party, who never signed up to this agreement, and on whom May relies for a majority in parliament, will not give their support. There are many in Birmingham who are old enough to remember the bombs of the

Luftwaffe and the atrocity of the IRA pub bombings of November 1974.

It is to be sincerely hoped that for the sake of all those who want to live in peace and enjoy a successful economy that offers opportunity and jobs for all that politicians of all persuasions commit themselves to a deal on Brexit that makes this possible. The dreadful casualties and suffering caused by past conflicts makes it essential those in whom we place our trust for outcome of the Brexit agreement process think extremely carefully about the consequences of taking decisions that might undermine such aspirations in any way.

It is in times such as these that, more than ever, our political leaders recognise the importance of looking to the future and creating peace following disagreement.

Keynes, J. M. (2017), *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Freeland Press

Rees, L. (1998), *The Nazis, A Warning from History*, The New Press