

Britain First:
The official history of the United Kingdom according to the Home Office
– a critical review

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Here is a question to test your historical knowledge: ‘D-Day refers to what event in British history?’ Of course, you know, or, at least, you thought you did. The right answer to the question is: ‘British invasion of Europe’. If you think this is a joke, have a look at the official app or booklet with practice questions to help people prepare for their citizenship and settlement exam in the United Kingdom.² As a recent new citizen who was born and raised in Germany, I am very grateful for the heroic sacrifice of many British men and women in the Second World War. But why does the Home Office want us to forget the many Americans and Canadians who died alongside them on the beaches in what was a joint *Allied* invasion?

In the recent debate about the removal of statues of slave traders and imperialists, Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted ‘we cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history’ (12 June). Unfortunately, his own government does precisely that in the *Life in the UK* handbook. Published by the Home Office, this book ‘has been approved by ministers and has official status’, and anyone who takes a citizenship or settlement test has to read and remember it. Since 2013, the chapter entitled ‘A long and illustrious history’ has put out a distorted, misleading and in important aspects false account of the past. The handbook includes bits of information about the justice system, geography and so forth; it also contains some, perhaps, less relevant bits such as the 1973 thriller “Don’t Look Now”. The history chapter, however, is not only riddled with factual errors but amounts to a distortion of the past that does violence to our basic understanding of history and raises fundamental questions for a liberal society.

Last month I helped coordinate an open letter from historians calling on the Home Office to review this official and mandatory text because of its misrepresentation of slavery and decolonisation. Many colleagues responded and chipped in with their expert knowledge. By 22 July, 181 historians – from bright young scholars to many of the most eminent historians writing today, and from diverse backgrounds – had added their name, and the letter was reported in several daily newspapers with parts of it

¹ I am grateful to the many fellow historians who have helped in one way or another with the historians’ letter calling for an official review, especially David Anderson, Mette Birkedal Bruun, John Brewer, Trevor Burnard, Elizabeth Chatterjee, Martin Daunton, Nick Draper, Margot Finn, Jo Fox, Anindita Ghosh, Catherine Hall, Julian Hoppit, Yasmin Khan, Julia Laite, Peter Mandler, Simon Newman, David Olusoga, Hannah Parker, Diana Paton, Steven Pincus, Jan Rueger, Hilary Sapire, Catherine Schenk, Sujit Sivasundaram, Sarah Stockwell, Naomi Tadmor, Becky Taylor, and Pat Thane. I owe special thanks to David Feldman and Elizabeth Ruddick for their advice and support throughout. The views expressed here are my own. A shorter version of this essay has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 4 September 2020, pp. 7-9.

² *Life in the United Kingdom: Official Practice Questions and Answers* – Supporting the official Home Office/TSO publication *Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents* (3rd edition) (tso/The Stationary Office, 2019), p. 137 (Question 20).

read verbatim on the BBC 6 o'clock radio news; it was also picked up by media in India, Pakistan, Jamaica and China.

In the letter, we drew attention to two statements in the official history as examples of the larger disregard for colonial people and imperial violence. The first is the assertion that slavery was 'illegal' (3: 42) in Britain by the eighteenth century.³ In reality, Britons debated whether slavery was illegal or not, and enslaved people were openly advertised for sale in British newspapers, as can be seen on the academic website created by the team led by Professor Simon Newman at the University of Glasgow: www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/for_sale/.⁴ The second concerned decolonisation. The British Empire was a conglomerate of different types of rule, and decolonisation, consequently took a different course in different regions, sometimes peaceful, at other times not. For an official text to claim that 'there was, for the most part, an orderly transition from Empire to Commonwealth, with countries being granted their independence' (3: 51), we thought, was simply wrong, in light of the chaos, deaths and violence in the Partition of India in 1947, the Mau-Mau Rebellion in 1952-60 and various other so-called "emergencies" from Malaya (1948-60) to Aden (1963-7).⁵

To give it authority, the original letter was circulated among experts in the history of Britain, the Empire and decolonisation. Ultimately, of course, the falsification of history – especially when it happens in an official, mandatory text – should be a concern, for all historians regardless of their particular area of expertise (and, I would hope, for citizens in general, too). Soon I received emails from other historians who also expressed strong feelings about the issue. The Historical Association – a professional body that is non-partisan, as is the group of signatories – provided the letter with a home on the web-page and the online iteration of its journal *History*, with a short form that allows historians at any stage of their career to add their name to the list. At the time of writing (5 August 2020), there are now a total of 566 signatories supporting the call for a review of the official history.

A charitable view of the characterisation of D-Day, slavery and decolonisation would be that these were accidental errors. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The three examples turn out to be the mere tip of an iceberg of distortions and falsifications. Since the historians' letter was published, I have done what all historians learn to do in their training. I have collected sources (the original 2004 handbook, the second edition published in 2007, and various official practice tests), placed the current

³ In the following, references to text quoted from the official handbooks are given in parentheses and refer to the number of edition, followed by the page number. (3: 42) refers to the third (current) edition at page 42. The first edition (2004) is cited as (1:), the second edition (2007) as (2:).

⁴ See also Simon P. Newman, 'Freedom-seeking slaves in England and Scotland, 1700-1780', *English Historical Review*, CXXXIV, 570 (Oct 2019): 1136-68.

⁵ There is a large literature on these subjects. Recent histories of Partition include Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: the Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, CT. , 2008). How many Kikuyu were tortured and murdered in so-called 'rehabilitation' camps in Kenya has been the subject of historical debate. Cf. David Anderson *The Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London, 2005) and Caroline Elkins in *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005). There is, however, consensus about the unprecedented scale of extra-judicial killing in the history of the British empire.

version alongside them and subjected these official texts to a critical source analysis. What comes out is disturbing.

Let me give here three instances to illustrate the types of interference with historical truth at work: the cutting out of the deaths of enslaved people during the Middle Passage and the altered portrayal of the slave trade; the deletion of Munich 1938 and Appeasement; and the presentation of Adolf Hitler and the Second World War.

Britain enslaved 3.2 million people, of whom 12.5% died on board British ships and another 20-25% in the first three years after arriving in the Caribbean.⁶ Both the 2004 and 2007 official histories acknowledged that many enslaved people died during the Middle Passage, although the original number given was a significant underestimate. In the current text, by contrast, the dead have been deleted altogether. Instead, ‘slaves’ are now merely ‘travelling on British ships in horrible conditions’ (3: 42). The slave trade is no longer ‘evil’ (2: 19) but ‘booming’ (3: 42). In 2007, the text acknowledged that ‘Liverpool and Bristol, gained great prosperity’ (2: 19) from the slave trade. Today, this sentence is gone, too. Instead, we are told that slavery was an ‘overseas industry’ (3: 42), as if British society was not affected by it; the only reference to ‘British ports’ (3: 43) appears a page later in the context of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The ‘free Africans and escaped slaves’ who previously made an appearance in 18th century Britain were left nameless, but, at least, the handbook acknowledged their existence, mentioned that they often worked as craftsmen and that ‘some of them wrote books about their experiences.’ (2: 19) Now they are equally shown the door and disappear from the stage of history altogether.⁷ All this cutting-out flies in the face of what historians have documented for some time about the entanglement of the slave trade with British society; see, e.g. the work of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership at UCL, www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/.

The second example concerns the origins of the Second World War. Readers of these pages will be familiar with Appeasement, the Munich Crisis 1938, and Neville Chamberlain’s doomed strategy to contain Adolf Hitler’s aggressive designs. Winston Churchill was among the few vocal and persistent critics. Whatever historians have argued about, everyone is agreed that Appeasement did happen and is an essential part of the story. Appeasement did feature in the old handbooks which mentioned that Prime Ministers failed to understand the serious threat posed by Hitler. By contrast, the present version cuts all this out and replaces it with ‘He [Hitler] set about renegotiating treaties, building up arms, and testing Germany’s military strength in

⁶ See <https://slavevoyages.org/>. See further Herbert S. Klein et al, ‘Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective’, in *William & Mary Quarterly*, LVIII/1 (Jan 2001): 93-118, and also now Nicholas Radburn “[M]anaged at first as if they were beasts:” The Seasoning of Enslaved Africans in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica’ in the special issue edited by Trevor Burnard and Natalie Zacek, *Journal of Global Slavery* (forthcoming).

⁷ The first edition (2004) also mentioned the Somerset-Stewart case and quoted four sentences from Lord Justice Mansfield’s verdict of 1772. It should be noted that Mansfield deliberately abstained from making a general judgement about the illegality of slavery as such, and, instead, focused more narrowly on prohibiting the removal of an enslaved person from England against his will. For competing rulings and interpretations, see William Wiecek ‘Somerset: Lord Mansfield and the Legitimacy of Slavery in the Anglo-American World, *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 86-146; as Wiecek noted ‘[n]o other English decision on slavery has been so often quoted and almost as often misunderstood’, p. 87.

nearby countries. The British government tried to avoid another war' (3: 55), and then jumps straight to Hitler's invasion of Poland.

This makes a mess of the origins of the Second World War. Hitler, in fact, was not 'renegotiating treaties' but tearing up the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno Pact when he marched into the Rhineland in March 1936. He had previously withdrawn from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference, in October 1933. The Rome-Berlin axis with Mussolini, in October 1936 was a new agreement, as was the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan. The handbook's choice of words for Hitler's intentions – 'testing Germany's military strength in nearby countries' – may be troubling for Czech ears. With Appeasement gone, readers now only learn two paragraphs after the invasion of Poland that Czechoslovakia had been invaded, too, at some unspecified date and that Austria had been 'occupied' (3: 56) ("annexed", to use the term normally used). Since Appeasement is no longer mentioned it also means Churchill can no longer take any credit for opposing it. After being introduced as a Conservative MP in 1900 we move straight to May 1940 when he became Prime Minister. Regardless what you think should happen to statues of Rhodes and other jingoists, this should raise eyebrows among conservatives as well as liberals and radicals.

A final example from a list, that gets longer the longer one looks at the official texts, concerns the Nazis. Earlier editions informed migrants of Adolf Hitler's 'racist ideology' (2: 22). The reference to racism is cut, too. Instead, we are now told that Hitler 'believed that the conditions imposed on Germany by the Allies after the First World War were unfair; he also wanted to conquer more land for the German people.' (3: 55) That's it. No anti-Semitism, no murder of the Jews, the Roma and Sinti, or the disabled. The Soviet Union is allowed a short walk-on part in a 'fierce conflict, with huge losses on both sides', but you would be hard pressed to know from this characterisation of the war that the Germans also murdered millions of civilians and prisoners of war in the East. Of course, Hitler (like most Germans) thought Versailles was unjust, and he also wanted to conquer *Lebensraum* for the German people. But this required forcibly deporting and murdering other peoples to make room. The two elements of Hitler's beliefs that have been added, while in themselves correct, acquire a different meaning when 'racist ideology' is eliminated and anti-Semitism is not mentioned. This passage would be a deeply troubling statement coming from anyone, but in an official history that is required reading for new citizens with the approval of the British state, it is unacceptable. Hitler's war was not an ordinary war of conquest but involved atrocities from the very start and quickly grew into a full-scale war of extermination.

For the last two generations, historians of Germany have worked hard to dispel the myth of an artificial separation between a "clean army" and the SS and show how from the invasion of Poland, military operations and mass murder were intertwined.⁸

⁸ The literature is too vast to list here and includes, e.g., Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord: Forschungen zur deutschen Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 1998); Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter and Ulrike Jureit (eds.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich, 2005); Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941 – 1944* (Munich, 2008). Jochen Böhrer has shown how atrocities were part of the German war from the start: by the end of October, eight weeks after the attack on Poland, 16,000 civilians and prisoners of war had been murdered, and by the end of 1939,

Here, in an official history, we are moving backwards into a fog of historical obfuscation.

Since David Cameron in 2016, Prime Ministers have supported a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Yet, neither in the official history chapter, nor anywhere in this 180 page long book ‘approved by ministers’, does the word Holocaust appear once. Of course, it was the Germans who were responsible for the Holocaust, not the British. Still, in an official text which explicitly aims to promote tolerance and which the Home Office defends for providing residents with ‘historical references which occur in daily conversations’,⁹ this omission is rather worrying, and at no time more so than today when there is growing concern about racism and anti-Semitism. Applicants for citizenship and settlement are asked to remember several hundred individuals and countless dates and battles. Is it really more critical for life in the UK today to know of Dame Mary Peters and the Battle of Marston Moor than of the Holocaust?

Where does this strange official view of history come from and where is it taking us? The current edition was released in 2013 and, with small changes, remains the mandatory handbook for migrants today and has been endorsed by ministers ever since. In 2013, the Home Office was headed by Theresa May. The Minister for Immigration at that time was Mark Harper, who directly linked the aim of cutting migration to the rewriting of the official history: ‘We have made radical changes to the immigration system and are determined to reduce net migration from the hundred of thousands into the tens of thousands by the end of the Parliament. ... The new book and test will focus on events and people who have contributed to making Britain great.’¹⁰ One of May’s Special Advisors was Stephen Parkinson who, two years later, headed the “Vote Leave” campaign. In 2013, the Home Office introduced the so-called “hostile environment” to drive down migrant numbers and to which, in the process, many of the so-called “Windrush generation” fell victim, some of whom had lived and worked in the country lawfully for over fifty years. The new chapter on the national past can be seen as a historical cousin of the “hostile environment”, eliminating the voices of migrants, enslaved people and colonial subjects from the annals of history. As the historians’ letter points out, in a list of over 200 individuals applicants have to learn, the ‘only individual of colonial origin named in the book is Sake Dean Mohamet, who co-founded England’s first curry house in 1810.’ In case you are interested, let me add here that in the very long list of names from Julius Caesar to Boris Johnson, the only other non-white people to appear are sports people and the architect Zaha Hadid.

The precise authorship of the new official history is difficult to determine, in part because the text does not have a single author to begin with. The majority of the current (3rd) edition has been lifted word for word from its two predecessors, the

7,000 Jews had been killed there; Jochen Böhrer, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg: Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt a.M., 2006). A recent magisterial history, in English and with further references, is Ulrich Herbert, *A History of Twentieth-Century Germany* (Oxford 2019; 1st Ger edn 2014).

⁹ Home Office response quoted in *The Guardian*, 22 July 2020.

¹⁰ 27 January 2013; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-culture-and-history-at-heart-of-new-life-in-the-uk-test> .

original *Life in the UK* handbook, introduced by the Labour Government in 2004 (1st edition) and the slightly revised 2nd edition of 2007. Bernard Crick, the political theorist and Labour advisor who earlier, in 1998, had made citizenship an integral part of the National Curriculum, was a lead author for the original chapter. A lot of the current history chapter is, effectively, a form of official self-plagiarism, and, since these are evolving official documents, there are good reasons for later editions building on earlier ones. This large overlap in text and information makes the deliberate cuts and rephrasing stand out the more. And it is in passages like those cited above concerning race, empire, conflict and national weakness that these interventions are most pronounced.

Arthur Chapman has coded the texts of the three editions of the handbook and subjected them to a comparative analysis of grammar and transitivity that records the numerical preponderance of certain narrative strategies.¹¹ One finding is the relative ‘absenting of agency’ in the current edition. However, when there is action, the current edition tends to prefer active to passive constructions. In the case of slavery, this has problematic consequences. Slaves ‘came’ from Africa, rather than being taken, and, as we have noted previously, they are ‘travelling’ whereas previously they had been ‘chained’ and ‘died’.

The earlier official histories under Labour certainly also had problems. They still featured, for example, the ‘legendary’ King Arthur. Similarly, to present Labour as united in support of decolonisation glossed over its own divides on empire. But errors sixteen years ago can hardly excuse new errors and distortions today.

There are three major differences that set the current official handbook apart. The first – and in my mind a critical one – is that the history pages in the 2004 and 2007 editions were purely for background information: history was not tested. Since 2013, the history chapter has been required reading because it is now tested. Second, for all its biases, the Labour versions in the opening paragraph did tell readers that ‘[a]ny account of history... is only one interpretation. Historians often disagree... (2: 7).’ In the chapter itself, there were several places where contemporaries were described as disagreeing, including about the costs and benefits of imperialism. In the current version, there is no room for diverse interpretations, and history is shoehorned into a smooth ‘long and illustrious history’ as far as possible. We are told, for example, that unspecified ‘others thought that the Empire had become over-expanded’, but then are confidently assured that ‘the great majority of British people believed in the Empire as a force for good in the world.’ (3: 51) Finally, we need to consider what each of these texts got wrong. Some errors and distortions are more serious and dangerous than others. For all its problems, the 2004 and 2007 did tell new citizens and settlers that enslaved people died in the Middle Passage and also that Hitler had a ‘racist ideology’. To get King Arthur wrong is one thing, to get Adolf Hitler wrong quite another.

There are plenty of places in the current edition where I cringe as a professional historian. The Glorious Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the American Revolution, they all contain basic errors; in general, the editors at the Home Office

¹¹ Arthur Chapman ‘Changing LIUK: Nation and narration in *Life in the United Kingdom*’ in: Nicola Brauch, Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.), *On Historical Narratives: Analyzing Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past* (Berghahn Books, 2021).

seemed to have had a problem with Revolution and, ironically, in a text written as a paean to enterprising Britain, miss out completely on the Financial Revolution and the Bank of England, too. Many colleagues have pointed out mistakes on everything from the Bill of Rights to social reform. But these errors are not what is at stake in the dispute. Of course, a 50-page accessible introduction to British history cannot be an academic monograph. We historians do not claim that we have a single correct interpretation of the past – that would be silly. Nor do we see it as our role to write the official history for the state. There are important differences between official history, public history and academic history. But, as historians, we must be able to protest when history is falsified, and especially when it comes in an official text that is a legal requirement for around 100,000 people every year.

As the above has already shown, Britain – or at least, the official mind – has a serious problem with race. The softening of the slave trade is, after all, complemented by a sanitising of Hitler. The rewriting radiates out across British history more widely resulting in an extreme version of insular nationalism. Some of it is so blatant that it is almost childish, but other bits are more serious. After Agincourt (1415), for example, the English are no longer kicked out by the French, but simply ‘left France’ (3: 21), as if they got bored with the local cuisine. Britain always needs to appear reasonable and victorious. Force disappears from the record, not just with regard to the slave trade but also in Ireland and elsewhere. The colonisation of Ulster by James I in the early 17th century, in which local Gaelic and Catholic groups had their lands confiscated or dispossessed and given to English and Scottish Protestant settlers, no longer involved ‘force’ (2: 14). Now the government simply ‘encouraged’ (3: 31) the so-called Plantations. And, so forth, all the way to the Troubles in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s, where the British army is also airbrushed out, with the result that dead British soldiers cannot be mentioned any longer either. Given that the troubled colonial past continues to cast a shadow over the present, this chapter serves up a poor civics lesson.

The only colonial rebels allowed onto the stage of this official history are the American patriots; the references in the 2004 and 2007 handbooks to ‘liberation or self-government movements’ (2: 22), particularly in India, has also been deleted. Even here, though, the massaging of text ends up in a distortion of history. The earlier official versions stated that ‘Parliament refused to compromise’ (2: 19) with the rebels who demanded “no taxation without representation.” Apparently that sounded too negative. The current version consequently micro-edited this paragraph to say that ‘Parliament tried to compromise by repealing some of the taxes, but relations between the British government and the colonies continued to worsen.’ (3: 43) It is true, in 1766, the Stamp Act was repealed, but it is also a fact that the same day the Declaratory Act was passed with which Westminster made it crystal-clear to the American colonists that Parliament reserved the right to make laws “in all cases whatsoever” – hardly an attempt at compromise. The earlier reference to the Declaration of Independence and its welcome by ‘many people in Britain and Europe’ (2: 19) also faced the chop. The Declaration of Independence – a milestone in the history of human rights – was cut at the same time as Theresa May, as head of the Home Office, was seeking to scrap the Human Rights Act.

The picture it paints of Britain in the world is at least as worrying. Since the official history harks back to 2013 one can also read it as a vision of Brexit Britain *avant la*

lettre. Ties with Europe are already cut in the text, three years before Brexit was decided. The cuts range from petty to significant. The Black Death used to be ‘one of the worst disasters to ever strike Britain and Europe’. (2: 11). Now it becomes a localised outbreak: ‘one of the worst disasters ever to strike Britain’. (3: 22). In more recent times, Britain’s important links to Europe and the world are cut, too. A section with a list of inventions that ‘Britain has given the world’ (3: 63) includes insulin, DNA, MRI and the World Wide Web. All of these involved international partners and laboratories. Tim Berners-Lee was, indeed, born in London, but the web was born at Cern, in Geneva. Perhaps only in Britain today do people learn about Francis Crick, without James Watson (American). Ministers may long for the good old days of Free Trade, but, judging by this text, they do not seem to grasp the basic principle of reciprocity in international exchange. In this official history, Britain always gives, never takes. The Britain in these pages is so boosterish and glorious that Great Britain ends up looking like little Britain, insecure and always shouting for attention.

As a Conservative text it also sheds interesting light on the identity crisis of the Conservative party. Significantly, it is not only people of colour, seventeenth-century religious extremists, and radical Levellers who no longer make the cut, but Disraeli, Salisbury and other heroes of the Conservative pantheon, too. If you happen to be a Conservative biographer, you should be worried. What is going on here? Part of this reshuffling of conventional history results from the urge to iron out conflict in order to paint a picture of the past as smooth, linear and always upwards. Even the Chartists, who unsuccessfully campaigned for universal manhood suffrage in the 1830s and 40s, did not fail. They only ‘at first seemed to be unsuccessful’ (3: 50). In 1867, with the Second Reform Act, and then in 1918, they, too, won. The long battle between Gladstone and Disraeli no longer fits either. Nor class conflict, more generally. David Cameron – who picked Disraeli as his hero – championed a one-nation conservatism, and, in 2015, Theresa May picked up the baton, though she then dropped it. In that vision, the elite played a crucial role as paternalist leaders who, over time, welcomed the hard-working, loyal and orderly rest of society with open arms. The official history, by contrast, does away with the aristocracy altogether in the modern period. Victorian politics used to be introduced with a note that the ‘aristocracy still dominated Parliament’ (2: 20) but that its power was challenged by 1832 (the First Reform Act) and the middle class. Now, we just get an ever-rising, ever-expanding middle class.

Official history has different masters and different audiences from academic history. That does not mean, though, they cannot talk to each other. In what I would describe as a lively exchange organised by *The Spectator* in August 2020 – the Whitehall lingo probably would be “robust” – I discussed the official history chapter with Stephen Parkinson.¹² He graciously conceded that the current chapter is wrong to say slavery was ‘illegal’ within the British Isles, but otherwise rallied to the defence of the official history. We had multiple disagreements, but one clash was over what official history was for and what it can or should do. His view was that it will never be possible to get everything right, and that the handbook is written for a popular audience, not for

¹² <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/has-britain-s-official-history-been-distorted-a-debate> , 23 Aug. 2020.

specialists. I think both of these points are right, actually. But, from them it does not follow that anything goes. You do not need a PhD to know that Hitler was anti-Semitic or that people died in the Middle Passage. The earlier statement that the slave trade was ‘evil’ is no more complicated than the now preferred term ‘booming’. Of course, history is complex – and the Holocaust certainly is. But that does not mean we cannot communicate it in a sensible manner. Lecturers like school-teachers and colleagues in museums, public education and elsewhere do it all the time. They have learnt how to simplify complex information when introducing pupils and citizens to historical topics. GCSE history includes the knowledge that Hitler held racist beliefs. Why should an official history for migrants not be able to do the same?

The second issue in the debate concerns societies’ capacity to confront the darker chapters of their national past. Here Parkinson drew a sharp contrast between old countries like Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany which, he said, was ‘quite literally, a different country’ from Nazi Germany and so had it easier to come to terms with the skeletons in its closet. In the time of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, this is, actually, a highly interesting as well as topical issue that touches on everything from questions of memorialisation to the history of justice and reparations. However, contrary to Parkinson’s suggestion, those Germans who took on responsibility for past injustices did so precisely because they insisted on continuity with the national past. Some might think of the Federal Republic as a completely different country, but in 1949 its constitution (the Basic Law or *Grundgesetz*) made it crystal clear that the Federal Republic was a continuation of the German *Reich*, and it continues to be so to this day.¹³ The continuous legal identity matters, because Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor, strongly felt that West Germany had a moral obligation not only to take on pre-war debts but also to pay reparations to many victims of the Nazis, although, of course, more should have been done. In fact, it was East Germany, which thought of itself as the product of immaculate conception, which refused to pay any reparations to Jewish victim – partly, because the crimes had been committed by the Nazis, partly because it would have meant giving money back to the “class enemy”.

For the British debate about what can (or cannot) be said in an official history, I think, the fact that Britain has a long history is not a decisive issue. Why should a country not be able to confront past injustices just because it has a long history? And how long or short does a history have to be before a country can hope to talk about it? Belgium became independent in 1830. In 2019, some cities took down Leopold II from their street names in protest against the massacres in the Congo. Should they have waited any longer? On 30 June 2020, in a letter to the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, King Philippe of Belgium expressed his ‘deepest regrets for the wounds of the past, the pain which is revived today by the discrimination still to present in our society.’ This stopped short of an apology but it did make the link between past violence and present discrimination. In Germany, in 2015, the then Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier, went further and officially recognised German colonial

¹³ Within Germany, a misunderstanding of this legal point has led some people on the fringes of the right to dispute the very existence of the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal authority to tax and police citizens. These so-called “*Reichsbürger*” instead insist that the Weimar Constitution of 1919 remains in effect. According to the *Verfassungsschutz* (the federal agency for internal security), there are about 12,000 *Reichsbürger*, including some with anti-semitic and extremist beliefs; <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/arbeitsfelder/af-reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter/was-sind-reichsbuerger-und-selbstverwalter>

troops' massacres of the Herero in Namibia before the First World War as a 'war crime and genocide'. On their own, public pronouncements such as these may not be enough, and there are important differences between the moral, legal, political and financial approaches to past injustice. But they are at least a step in the right direction.

Of course, not all societies travel in that same direction. History, and especially moral history, is not linear and progressive. Japan has pursued a different course of historical memory and politics than Germany. Last month, at the 75th anniversary of Japan's surrender, a handful of cabinet members visited the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo to pay their respects to Japan's war dead as well as convicted war criminals – Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has not visited the shrine since 2013 but sent offerings, and his speech to marking the day referred only to the suffering of Japanese soldiers and civilians, not to their victims.

Some theorists have argued that the path towards greater justice is via responsibility, leaving guilt to the side. For Iris Marion Young, guilt is backward looking while responsibility is forward looking and avoids an endless, bitter blame game. There is arguably a danger that an emphasis on blame can result in excessive focus on individual guilt and distract from structural conditions of injustice. On the other hand, how will societies be able to see and tackle current and future injustice if they do not have any understanding of injustice in the past? As Martha Nussbaum, a sympathetic critic of Young's, has pointed out, 'it is a little hard to see how we ever get to the future without a critique of the past: praise and blame for good and bad actions that have already happened help a child learn how to perceive new situations in the future'.¹⁴ It is such a historically-informed critique that provides incentives for good actions.

The United States has fought over slavery and its legacy throughout its history. Within Britain itself, empire has always called forth its critics, from John Wilkes (who supported the Americans) to Mary Kingsley (who challenged prejudices in her travels in West Africa). Many held ambivalent views about empire, including Kingsley herself. Contemporaries had heated discussions about the pros and cons of empire. Why assume that Britons today are incapable of doing the same? If Kingsley was able to treat Boer prisoners of war and die in the process in 1900, should the current Home Office history not be able to say 120 years later something more than just that Boers died from 'disease' (3: 51), without acknowledging the slaughter of civilians and that tens of thousands died in concentration camps, including women and children? Talking about past injustice is not automatically unpatriotic. In fact, you could see it as the patriotic and decent thing to do.

Ultimately, the story of the rewriting of official history reflects badly on almost everyone. The text has been in the public domain since 2013 and is, as the Home Office assures everyone, 'regularly' updated. There has been public debate about the sheer number of facts, names and events migrants are expected to read and remember. The odd quote or fact has been corrected. Yet, in none of these discussions has the broader misrepresentation of empire and race attracted any serious attention. Do

¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford 2011); Nussbaum's foreword, quoted at p. xxii.

ministers and civil servants not read the text they expect over a hundred thousand applicants for citizenship and settlement to study every year?

The historical profession – and I include myself in this criticism – does not come out well either. It is, of course, better to protest late than never. But why have we historians collectively not spoken out sooner against this misleading and, in parts, offensive caricature of history? In *History Today* last year, Joanne Paul, an early modernist, gave an insightful account of her own depressing experience with the test;¹⁵ even that, however, was more than six years after it had been imposed on migrants, and, as far as I am aware, prompted no response from the Home Office.

That there is a lot of fake history out there is, I think, no excuse. The history chapter is, after all, an officially endorsed text. Many colleagues have spoken out in the debate about the National Curriculum, and that is good, and some did voice their concern when the original citizenship book was introduced in 2004; at that time, though, the history pages were not mandatory and not tested. I am aware that nations and governments have for a long time been involved in the ‘invention of tradition’, as my late colleague Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger called it. The citizenship test and the current history, however, are in one vital way different from a memorial or a national pageant which you can decide whether to join. It is also unlike school text, which can be discussed in class and where students and teachers can weigh evidence and argue with each other. This official history has since 2013 been a legal requirement. It has to be read and remembered, whether an aspiring citizen or permanent resident likes it or not, without any space for debate or disagreement.

In the past couple of weeks, so many colleagues have written to me about their personal experiences and frustrations with this official history book and the accompanying test, the many errors and distortions, and, above all, a feeling that this official history does not reflect how we teach history these days. As one friend wrote, his husband decided he did not even need to study the history chapter – he quickly knew that all he had to do was tick the answer that would make England look good. The test is meant to promote integration by imparting a basic understanding of British history. Instead it provokes anger and contempt.

In my own case, I took the citizenship test two and a half years ago – at the time, a quick glance at the history chapter convinced me that I would not bother myself with those pages – after all, British, European and world history has been my bread and butter for over thirty years – and instead use my time to learn how old the Giants Causeway is and who John Petts was. From his description in the book, he appeared an obscure Welsh engraver, and I was annoyed at having to learn yet another trivial name. But even here, I found out later, patriotism is white-washed and the handbook fails to mention the remarkable achievement for which he should be officially remembered. In 1963, Petts raised funds from thousands of Welsh people to create a stained glass window featuring a Black Jesus for the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in memory of the four African-American girls murdered there by the KKK. Unfortunately, that sort of thing you learn on Wikipedia, not in the official history.

¹⁵ 10 October 2019; <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/making-history/testing-times> .

Fortunately, I passed my test, though I briefly contemplated becoming famous as the historian who failed the LIUK test. But, to be honest, I have tried to suppress my visit to the Iranian Association test centre in Hammersmith and, the minute I got home, moved the official book and its history out of sight. It was only the combination of the Windrush scandal, Black Lives Matter and my current work on the Germans that finally made me decide to try and do something about it. In the week before drafting a first version of the letter and discussing it with fellow historians, I finished a chapter on guilt, shame and justice in the years after the Second World War. In my notes, I stumbled again across Erich Lüth. Lüth was the press officer of the Hamburg Senate and, in 1950, called for a boycott of the new film (“Immortal Beloved”, a family drama) by Veit Harlan, who had directed the anti-Semitic “Jud Süß” for the Nazis. The case is today largely remembered as a milestone in constitutional history, for it eventually triggered a famous ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court in 1958 which found in Lüth’s favour and asserted the primacy of free speech, as protected by the Basic Law (Grundgesetz). Equally interesting, though, was what happened outside the courts. Lüth refused to be intimidated by Harlan’s producers and, indeed, by legal action. Instead he continued to speak out. There were calls for boycotts in several German cities, and some youths disrupted screenings. Lüth showed what the Germans call Zivilcourage. Lüth’s case against Harlan – that, while the courts had not found him guilty, he had still forfeited the moral right to be part of a revival of German film – is, of course, very different from the issues raised by the Home Office’s official history in the UK today; and none of the signatories to the historians’ letter have been threatened by legal action. Still, as a historian, I felt, we should be prepared to stand up for historical truth and show the courage of our convictions.

The vast majority of British historians have, of course, been born British and thus never had to read this history, let alone take the test – some have heard about it second hand, others I talked to did not even know it existed. I am glad that so many, on reading the official pages, have added their voice of protest. In truth, the official history has been siloed as an issue for migrants – this, in itself, is sad because, of course, the majority of applicants do become citizens or acquire the right to settle and in most cases have already been living in Britain for many years; I am not aware of reliable, continuous public data for the years since 2013, but the figures that are available suggest that at least a third of all applicants fail the test, often with grave consequences for themselves and their families.¹⁶

So, where will all this lead? As everyone knows, the Home Office has had serious problems with its record keeping, and one should not be naïve and think they will be able to handle the official record of the past any better. But, as of today, over 500 historians have signed the call for a review, and our letter has been circulated to members of the parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee. We do not claim that

¹⁶ There is no consecutive official data for pass rates for the LIUK test for 2013-2020, as far as I am aware of. The data that is available, however, suggests a rise in failures and resits after the introduction of the current (2013) edition. Numbers of tests taken and pass rates from April 2010 through March 2014 can be found on page 12 of the Home Office “Transparency Data” published in June 2014, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/378804/ho_performance_data_2013_14_q4_v09.pdf. The pass rate has continued to fall: 70% in the 2013-14 year, 61% in 2014-15, and 60.33% in the first three quarters of 2015-16. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/life_in_the_uk_test_statistics_2 In 2015/16, 31,433 people resat the test at least once, of whom 17,343 (55%) failed. In 2016-17, 22,909 resat the test, and 12,477 (54.46%) failed.

we have one correct version of history to fix it. But we share the view that there is a serious problem that calls for a review. Some of us feel the whole *Life in the UK* test should be abolished altogether. My personal view is that there is no harm in new citizens learning about key historical topics, as long as they are responsibly handled – whether this should be in the form of background information (as it was until 2013) or as part of a required test is another matter. In its citizenship interview, the United States, for example, asks applicants to give one of six reasons colonists decided to leave Europe for the New World. That’s alright, I think. Germany expects new citizens to know that racism was the central feature of the Nazi regime – whoever at the Home Office was responsible for the paragraph on Hitler should be encouraged to go on the official German webpage (www.oet.bamf.de/pls/oetut/f) and look up the materials there and try out the practice test. In Denmark, which has an official history text that matches the British one in scope (though, fortunately, not in anything else), the main criticism, Danish colleagues tell me, has been that new citizens are expected to know about the ‘Olsen-Banden’, a TV show that was popular in the 1950s and 60s.

I am not saying the official handbook does not contain useful information, for example in the pages on the different courts and legal systems in the various parts of the United Kingdom, or the links to websites for making complaints against the police or seeking protection against domestic violence. The current history chapter, however, is shot through with so much misrepresentation that it cannot be allowed to stand. As the above should have made abundantly clear, I hope, this is not about a few historians quibbling about a date here or there or nuances in interpretation. It is not about dotting a few i’s and crossing a few t’s.

I would like to take the Prime Minister at his word when he said that we must not edit or censor our past. We can have a debate about which statues should stay up or come down, and, perhaps, also which new statues should be commissioned for people who had been written out of the national history. But when it comes to the distortion of history in a key official text, there can, I believe, only be agreement that such a text needs to be withdrawn pending review.

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The original letter and list of signatories can be viewed at this webpage <https://historyjournal.org.uk/2020/07/21/historians-call-for-a-review-of-home-office-citizenship-and-settlement-test/> . It is not too late to join.