


“Cultural Trauma, Populist Grand Narratives, and Brexit”

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Recently, increased academic attention has been paid to the role played in populist rhetoric by narratives surrounding humiliation and trauma. These studies analytically focus on how populist politicians use such narratives to legitimize their messages, as a response to genuine voter demands or worries. We argue populist messaging may just as easily be constructed through a top-down, elite-driven process, rather than in response to grassroots demands. We examine the use of cultural trauma and humiliation in narratives surrounding Brexit from 2013 to the present day. We argue that these narratives, which typically tended to focus on the UK's loss of international status during the twentieth century (and the role that membership of the EU played in this), were largely constructed by pro-Brexit members of the British political establishment and the Conservative Party. We find that these articulations served two main purposes. First, they allowed prominent Brexiteers to build a defensive wall around themselves against criticism from domestic and foreign political rivals. Secondly, they significantly raised the political significance of the process of Brexit. This allowed Brexit to be portrayed as a grand project of national rejuvenation, and its supporters as the defenders of this project. Thus, Brexit, and narratives evoking humiliation and trauma, remained central even after the country formally left the EU. Indeed, Brexit itself has become a traumatic event invoking further grand narratives that continue to draw on and create a sense of humiliation and cultural trauma, both for those who voted to leave and to remain.

On accorde récemment de plus en plus d'intérêt au rôle joué par la rhétorique populiste dans les récits autour de l'humiliation et du traumatisme. Sur le plan analytique, ces études se concentrent sur l'utilisation de ces récits par les politiciens populistes pour légitimer leurs messages, en réponse aux demandes et préoccupations réelles des électeurs. Nous affirmons que les messages populistes pourraient tout aussi bien se construire par le biais d'un processus descendant, fondé sur les élites, plutôt qu'en réponse aux demandes de la population. Nous examinons le recours au traumatisme culturel et à l'humiliation dans les récits entourant le Brexit de 2013 jusqu'à ce jour. Nous affirmons que ces récits, qui se concentraient généralement sur la perte de statut international du RU au cours du 20^e siècle (et le rôle de l'adhésion à l'UE dans cette perte), ont été majoritairement construits par des membres de l'establishment politique britannique favorables au Brexit et le parti conservateur. Nous observons que ces articulations servaient principalement deux objectifs. D'abord, elles permettaient à d'importants partisans du Brexit de s'entourer d'un mur défensif face aux critiques de rivaux politiques nationaux et internationaux. Ensuite, elles ont considérablement gonflé l'importance politique du processus du Brexit. Ainsi, le Brexit a été dépeint tel un grand projet de rajeunissement national, et ses partisans tels les défenseurs de ce projet. Aussi, le Brexit et les récits évoquant l'humiliation et le traumatisme ont joué un rôle central, même après le départ formel de l'UE par le pays. En effet, le Brexit en lui-même est devenu un événement traumatisant, source de nouveaux grands récits qui continuent de se nourrir de l'humiliation et du traumatisme culturel et d'en créer, tant pour ceux qui ont voté pour que pour ceux qui ont voté contre.

En los últimos años, se ha ido prestando una mayor atención por parte del mundo académico al papel que desempeñan las narrativas en materia de humillación y trauma dentro de la retórica populista. Estos estudios se centran, de manera analítica, en la forma por la cual los políticos populistas utilizan tales narrativas con el fin de legitimar sus mensajes, en respuesta a demandas o preocupaciones genuinas de los votantes. Argumentamos que los mensajes populistas pueden construirse fácilmente a través de un proceso de arriba hacia abajo, impulsado por la élite, en lugar de responder a las demandas de los ciudadanos. Estudiamos el uso del trauma cultural y de la humillación en las narrativas que rodean el Brexit desde 2013 hasta la actualidad. Argumentamos que estas narrativas, que típicamente tendían a centrarse en la pérdida del estatus internacional del Reino Unido durante el siglo XX (y el papel que jugó la membresía de la UE en esto), fueron construidas en gran medida por miembros pro-Brexit del establishment político británico y por el Partido Conservador. Concluimos que estas narrativas sirvieron para lograr dos propósitos fundamentales. En primer lugar, permitieron a prominentes partidarios del Brexit construir un muro defensivo a su alrededor contra las críticas de rivales políticos, tanto nacionales como extranjeros. En segundo lugar, plantearon de forma significativa la importancia política del proceso de Brexit. Todo esto permitió que el Brexit pudiera llegar a ser definido como un gran proyecto en materia de rejuvenecimiento nacional, y sus partidarios quedaban retratados como los defensores de este proyecto. Por lo tanto, el Brexit, y las narrativas que evocan humillación y trauma, siguieron siendo de vital importancia incluso después de que el país abandonara formalmente la UE. De hecho, el Brexit en sí mismo se ha convertido en un evento traumático que invoca nuevas y grandilocuentes narrativas que continúan aprovechando y creando una sensación de humillación y trauma cultural, tanto para aquellos que votaron por irse de la UE como para aquellos que votaron para quedarse.

Introduction

Recently, increased academic attention has been paid to the ways in which narratives relating to trauma and humiliation are constructed by right-wing populist politicians and movements. Homolar and Löffmann (2021, 2), for instance, have examined the role that humiliation- and trauma-based narratives have played in contemporary political projects. According to them, such methods are effective because of their resonance amongst white working-class communities and function to build a politically useful sense of relative deprivation (Homolar and Löffmann 2021, 3–4). This then allows these narratives to be used as a way of building a common “prejudice” against those constructed as not being “true” members of the nation (Homolar and Löffmann 2021, 9). Meanwhile, Giurlando (2020, 66) has argued that populist politicians can capitalize upon feelings of humiliation and betrayal among the electorate by promising the restoration of dignity, and the punishment of those responsible for the humiliation in the first place. Such a dynamic was previously described by Mudde (2007, 65–66), who identified humiliation- and trauma-based narratives as being a fundamental part of the “thin ideology” of populism, which creates a hostile dichotomy between an idealized “pure people” on one hand, and a corrupted elite who, along with their internal and external minions, seek to undermine and subjugate the true members of the nation at every turn. According to this formulation, the “true” representatives of this idealized group seek to do battle against the corrupted, cosmopolitan elite, and to return the nation to an often unspecified, and perhaps even mythical, Golden Age which supposedly existed in the past (Elçi 2022, 699).

While articles identifying the fact that populists use nostalgic or traumatic narratives to legitimize their messages are numerous, discussions about how and why these specific narratives are constructed are relatively understudied in the literature. Indeed, much of the literature analytically focuses on the “demand-side,” or bottom-up, elements of populist messaging, and particularly examines how political elites craft narratives in response to the demands of their representatives. Löffman (2019, 118), for instance, follows up his identification of the humiliation-based rhetoric of Donald Trump and Steve Bannon by arguing that these narratives largely reflected the beliefs of those who would go on to support Trump in the 2016 election. Likewise, Hochschild (2016, 220) has described how Donald Trump’s messaging in the lead-up to the 2016 US Presidential election capitalized on the feelings of humiliation and betrayal experienced by her study participants (and presumably, a wider section of the American populace). Generally speaking, research on populism often tends to focus on how populist politicians respond to this *volonté générale* of the electorate. While this is an important and valuable contribution, it sometimes neglects an examination of the extent to which such feelings, and even the humiliations and traumas underpinning them, may be actively cultivated and constructed by right-wing politicians and media figures in the first instance (Freistein et al. 2022, 4–5).

The major contribution of this article, thus, is to contribute to a broader understanding of the emergence of populist narratives by placing our analytical focus on the “supply-side,” or top-down, construction of cultural trauma by political elites, and the implications of this. Specifically, we build upon previous research by Toomey (2018), (Freistein et al. 2022), and Browning (2019), by examining how narratives surrounding cultural trauma and humiliation were constructed during campaigns surrounding the

United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union (EU), colloquially known as “Brexit.” This article addresses the following research questions:

- *How might traumatic narratives and discourses surrounding the loss of national independence and status be constructed from the top down by political elites?*
- *How were such narratives and discourses employed within the context of Brexit debates?*
- *How did these narratives inform, shape, and facilitate the political strategies and successes of the Conservative Party after 2016?*

Brexit has been a dominant issue in British politics since David Cameron’s “Bloomberg Speech” in January 2013, when he announced his support for holding a referendum on British membership of the EU. Since then, and even after the official departure of the United Kingdom from the EU on January 31, 2020, Brexit continued to have a decisive impact on developments and debates in British politics. As late as the summer of 2022 (following Boris Johnson’s resignation as Prime Minister), Brexit was a prominent issue in the contest to become the new Conservative Party leader and, therefore, Prime Minister.

What is notable about the process of Brexit is that before, during, and after the campaign, leaving the EU has rarely been sold by its proponents as a project aimed at achieving specific, concrete benefits. Certainly, claims that Brexit would supposedly allow the United Kingdom to recoup £350 million a week it had been spending in EU budget contributions (BBC News 2018), or that it would allow the country to control immigration and to negotiate independent free trade deals, were offered as examples of the material benefits of Brexit. However, more commonly, the benefits of Brexit were elaborated in more abstract terms. Brexit was consistently portrayed by its advocates in the Conservative Party and elsewhere as being a project of national rejuvenation, by which the United Kingdom would be restored to its rightful position of international prestige (cf. Johnson 2018). The ubiquitous, and very effective, slogan “take back control,” for example, which was particularly associated with the Conservative-backed “Vote Leave” campaign organization, implies an impending restoration of British independence, power, prestige, and agency, when freed from the decaying, decrepit EU (Virdee and McGeever 2018, 1804–5).

More directly, Kemi Badenoch, in her maiden speech as a Conservative Member of Parliament in July 2017, described the Brexit vote as “... the greatest ever vote of confidence in the project of the United Kingdom” (Badenoch 2022). Similarly, following the UK’s official exit from the EU in January 2020, Boris Johnson claimed that this would lead to a revival of the United Kingdom’s “... power of independent thought and action... it is potentially a moment of real national renewal and change” (Stewart, Boffey, and Syal 2020). These narratives, emphasizing renewal, rejuvenation, and the restoration of agency and status, were central to the “leave” discourse on the UK’s relationship with the EU. Most importantly, they imply that the United Kingdom suffered a traumatic reverse during the twentieth century, one which was principally related to, if not caused by, joining the European Community (EC) in 1973, and which required a decisive break with the UK’s prior political trajectories for it to be resolved.

In this article, we seek to map out and explain how these historical myths and grand narratives of humiliation and trauma (and their resolution) have unfolded and developed from the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, but especially since 2013. Theoretically, we argue that elite-constructed narratives of trauma and humiliation can serve

valuable political purposes, through their propensity to legitimize or delegitimize actors or causes, shape and manipulate generalized understandings of history, and even to give rise to the emergence of unifying “grand projects.” Empirically, we intend to show how these narratives were used by figures within the Conservative Party to create a unifying “grand project” focused on allowing the United Kingdom to break free of the cultural trauma and humiliation of EU membership to forge a new, more prosperous future. This allowed them to consolidate their political power, while giving purpose and legitimacy to their rule. Through monopolizing the pro-Brexit discourse they also became the guardians of a process of national rejuvenation, by undoing the trauma of EU membership. This, in turn, allowed them to deflect criticisms over Brexit’s process or manifestation as the bitterness of “Remoaners,” or as attempts to otherwise thwart or reverse Brexit.

We begin by establishing the theoretical framework and methodology upon which the main analytical argument is based. This framework is one which is based primarily on Jeffrey Alexander’s work on cultural trauma (2004; 2012), Tapio Juntunen’s work on parachronistic reasoning in political research (2017), and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara’s understanding of the political purpose of historical myths and narratives (2016). In this section, we illustrate how humiliation is a form of cultural trauma, and how narratives establishing a country’s humiliation can be elaborated by self-interested political elites, based upon politicized readings of historical events. Subsequently, we examine how the “humiliation” of the loss of British independence and prestige was interwoven with the UK’s relationship with the EU. We argue that this narrative of humiliation and trauma, embedded in elite discourse even before the United Kingdom joined the EC, became a recurring theme of longer standing Euroscepticism and a central pillar of the Leave campaign, particularly for Brexit-supporting members of the Conservative Party.

The article then goes on to discuss the ways in which EU membership has been framed by important factions within both the Labour and Conservative Parties as the embodiment of a historical trauma restricting UK sovereignty and undermining its international status. The article predominantly focuses on Conservative Party rhetoric (particularly during Boris Johnson’s Prime Ministership), due to the party’s leading role in the 2010–2015 Coalition Government and their being the party of government since 2015. Additionally, political benefits from Brexit (such as the demise of the UK Independence Party and the landslide election result in 2019) were largely accrued by the Conservative Party (and by specific political figures within the party), and as such, it is particularly relevant to focus on their role in constructing the narratives surrounding trauma and humiliation that supposedly necessitated Brexit as a corrective. Finally, it concludes by discussing the implications these particular constructions of history have had for contemporary British politics, how they functioned to facilitate the electoral successes of the Conservative Party prior to and after the 2016 referendum, and how they served to maintain the fractious voting coalition which delivered Boris Johnson’s dominant victory in the 2019 general election.

We argue that the top–down way the humiliation and cultural trauma of the UK’s loss of international status was constructed served several political purposes for the Conservative Party and for those other “carriers” of the trauma. First, it allowed those associated with the pro-Brexit wing of the party, particularly figures like Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, to outflank and outmaneuver their intra-party rivals.

Secondly, it allowed Conservative pro-Brexiters to build a defensive shield against criticism from domestic rivals, who could subsequently be dismissed as “Remoaners,” saboteurs, or enemies of the democratic will of the British people (as expressed through the Brexit referendum). Most importantly, however, it allowed the process of Brexit to continually be asserted as an issue of key significance to the electorate, even after the referendum was concluded. This ensured that Brexit remained a central rallying point for British politics in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2019 election when the country had already left the EU and the matter, ostensibly, was resolved.

Since the referendum on UK membership was announced, a vast literature has emerged interrogating Brexit from a wide variety of perspectives: analyzing the referendum vote (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Swales 2016); explaining the underlying dynamics of the vote to leave the EU (Curtice 2017; Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017a; Sobolewska and Ford 2020; Ford and Goodwin 2017); examining implications of Brexit for UK politics, political parties, and parliament (Calhoun 2016; Bale 2023; Cutts, Goodwin, Heath, and Surridge 2020; Evans and Menon 2017; Heinkelmann-Wild, Kriegmair, Rittberger, and Zangl 2020; Martill and Staiger 2021; Quinn, Allen, and Bartle 2022; Russell and James 2023); exploring populism and Brexit (Calhoun 2016; Freedon 2017; Tournier-Sol 2021); unpacking emotions, discourses and narratives of nostalgia, empire, and identity (Browning 2018; Virdee and McGeever 2018; Campanella and Dassù 2019; Ward and Rasch 2019; Kogler, Malreddy and Tronicke 2020; Saunders 2020; Melhuish 2022; Melhuish 2023); and finally, situating Brexit within the long *durée* of United Kingdom–Europe/EU relations (Reynolds 2019; Wall 2020; Stephens 2021; Tombs 2021). This article seeks to build on and connect some of the key themes from these literatures, including the drivers and discourse of Brexit, populism, nostalgia, and the history of Eurosceptic views in the United Kingdom. Its key contributions to this literature are to draw attention to the supply side, top–down aspects of populism that were evident in the Brexit campaign; and to bring a new conceptual framework and perspective to bear—that of humiliation and cultural trauma—as a lens through which Brexit may be partially explained.

Lastly, the article demonstrates how, as a narrative of trauma constructed without regard for historical accuracy or reality (but rather out of political expediency), Brexit may never be “done,” and the traumas supposedly necessitating it ameliorated. Indeed, the difficulty and instability of the process means that Brexit, itself, could potentially be constructed in the future as a further cultural trauma for the United Kingdom.

The Construction and Purpose of Traumatic Narratives

One of the primary purposes of this article is to contribute to understanding of the manner in which narratives about trauma and humiliation are constructed and elaborated and the roles such narratives can subsequently play in politics. Cultural trauma can be defined as:

“...a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.”” (Erikson 1976, 153–154).

Cultural traumas are often connected to catastrophes or defeats which inflict a grievous sense of loss on a population, but may also be connected to a sense of having suffered humiliation. While it might be easy to conflate humiliation with similar feelings such as shame or embarrassment, there are crucial differences. Embarrassment is a milder emotion, unlikely to lead to the powerful feelings of grievance and loss associated with humiliation. Meanwhile, shame implies a sense that one has committed a wrong, for which they ought to atone; humiliation, in contrast, leads to a feeling that one has been wronged, and can contribute to a "... sense of permanent loss and feelings of impotence, frustrated rage, despair..." (Leask 2013, 131; see also, Gerodimos 2022, 35; Trumbull 2008, 644). Indeed, according to Klein (1991, 95–96), humiliation is one of the most powerful motivators of individual and collective human behavior. As such, attempting to create a distinction between a cultural humiliation and a cultural trauma is not particularly useful, as humiliation is itself a form of trauma, perhaps one of the most severe traumas to suffer.

Trauma narratives in populist messaging are commonly described in a manner that reflects a "bottom-up" understanding of how societal or cultural traumas are realized. In this sense, traumas are constructed and given meaning through processes of common, mutual communication among and between members of the "traumatized" group or society (Sztompka 2000, 279–280). This focus often demonstrates an analytical emphasis on the demand-side of populism. Populists, and populist narratives, are commonly examined as a reflection of a real set of demands, traumas, or fears from the voters, whether the significance of these particular demands is subsequently inflated by the populist or not.

However, in contrast to this bottom-up approach, cultural traumas can also be elaborated through an elite-driven, "top-down" process. According to Jeffrey Alexander, "traumas" are interpreted, elaborated, and (effectively) constructed by "carrier groups",¹ who establish and disseminate the nature and significance of these traumas in pursuit of their own goals and interests (Alexander 2004, 11–12). For such an elite-driven trauma to achieve cachet or acceptance with the community in question, these carriers engage in the construction of complex symbolic myths and stories (Alexander 2012, 17). In this sense, the elaboration and realization of a cultural trauma may be an elitist process as much as it may be grassroots-driven, and may just as easily be a reflection of the understandings and objectives of specific carriers and interest groups as a society at large. Accordingly, cultural myths and traumas may be as much of a supply-side, as opposed to a demand-side, phenomenon, and ought to be studied as such. Rather than merely being an impetus for a given actor to react to a set of grievances among the electorate, myths and narratives surrounding cultural trauma can instead be used by populist political figures to effectively construct the grievance in the first place. Succinctly put, populism (and the populist use of narratives surrounding trauma and humiliation) is not merely about the dark reflection of electorate demands by opportunistic elites, but is a much more dynamic phenomenon than it is sometimes (perhaps inadvertently) portrayed as. Elites are often effectively responsible for the creation, elaboration, and/or reactivation of the "traumas" and "humiliations" they simultaneously argue demand resolution and restitution.

¹According to Alexander, there is not necessarily any specific characteristic to these carrier groups, who may be "... prestigious religious leaders or groups whom the majority has designated as spiritual pariahs... [they may] be generational... national... [or] institutional..." (Alexander 2004, 11).

The concept of cultural trauma closely resembles Volkan's concept of "chosen traumas." According to Volkan, a chosen trauma is a collective understanding possessed by every large group of a jointly suffered traumatic past event, in which they suffered "... loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame, and humiliation..." (Volkan 2001, 87). Over decades of intergenerational transmission of this trauma, the historical veracity of the event becomes blurred and even somewhat unimportant, while the overarching narrative becomes a crucial element in the construction and reconstruction of the group's identity (Volkan 2001, 88). For Volkan, chosen traumas are typically not heavily considered in times of peace and prosperity, and may only be recalled during anniversaries or similar occasions (Volkan 2021, 20). However, in times of stress and crisis, the chosen trauma may be recalled and a sense of "time collapse" may emerge, whereby the trauma is almost psychically re-encountered in the present, and its lessons and narratives applied to contemporary events (Volkan 2001, 89). Volkan argues that chosen traumas are not events from recent history or even living memory, as the stories and narratives of more recent traumas are still "alive" in the possessions, memories, and experiences of survivors (Volkan 2021, 22). As a result of this, they are not as likely to be distorted and mythologized in the way that chosen traumas are. However, on that latter point, we distinguish our claims from those of Volkan. We argue that it is possible for "recent" cultural traumas to be subject to the manipulation, fabrication, and even sometimes wholesale manufacturing of historical myths and narratives, although this is obviously less easy than in the case of the chosen traumas from outside living memory that Volkan describes. As a result of this, moving forward, while our arguments are influenced and informed by those of Volkan, we employ the concept of cultural trauma in our discussion rather than his concept.

Historical myths and narratives are developed and elaborated within a given setting and can substantially shape the ways in which the individuals living in that setting perceive the world. They condition understandings of what actions or issues are acceptable and unacceptable, desirable and undesirable, legitimate and illegitimate, and serious and trivial (Browning 2002, 48; Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 19). For Leira, historical analogies are built on contemporary understandings of the world, which provide these understandings with new meaning (while simultaneously creating a break in the original relationship between the "... signifier and signified" (Leira 2017, 82). Meanwhile, for Bliesemann de Guevara (2016, 32–36), historical myths may be employed in four key ways: as ways of distorting language and knowledge in the service of creating or recreating a given hierarchy; as a series of coping strategies used by organizations for dealing with societal influences or dilemmas; as a way of structuring, and thus naturalizing, knowledge and hierarchical structures; and as a way of constructing narratives and paradigms which themselves drive the construction of social "knowledge" in a given context. Alternatively, according to Juntunen (2017, 62–63), historical myths can be used to replace historically contingent and temporally specified narratives, with sweeping and generalized "grand narratives." Problematically, this can result in the world being interpreted as more static than it is, and can lead to the lessons drawn from these "grand narratives" being applied to cases and events that might be completely dissimilar (Juntunen 2017).

While this may suggest that such errors are unintentional and are simply the result of faulty historical reasoning or analysis, it is crucial to note that political ideas may also be

knowingly and wilfully based on false readings of historical traditions. In such cases, intentional “errors” are made in pursuit of developing politically suitable narratives. Even where these mistakes are unintentional, and where a genuinely “honest” account of history is being sought, having a vested interest in a narrative being interpreted in a certain way can lead to inaccuracies or falsehoods being ignored or glossed over. Political imperatives often sit uneasily with the examination and discussion of historical subjects (Lazaroms and Gioielli 2012, 656). Combined with the way in which cultural and social traumas are constructed through the elaboration of historical narratives (as opposed to existing necessarily as a matter of fact), this highlights the importance of understanding the manner through which such discussions and discourses are established, and of understanding the political imperatives informing their establishment.

This section has established a framework for understanding how narratives and myths about cultural trauma can be developed, elaborated, and used to enable and legitimate specific political strategies and tactics. The construction, realization, and interpretation of a cultural trauma can be a function of messaging from powerful elite-based carrier groups, such as political leaders and media outlets, just as much as they can be a function of grassroots, bottom-up interpretations of the (supposedly) traumatizing events. Elite-driven narratives can then be used as a political tool to legitimize or delegitimize actors, entities, or causes, and can provide a unifying understanding of history. It is important to note that in the case of cultural traumas, this unified understanding of a traumatic and traumatizing past thus gives rise and legitimacy to the emergence of a “grand project,” purportedly aimed at resolving this trauma. Indeed, one of the significances of both cultural traumas and chosen traumas is that they create imperatives for the reversal of the trauma and the restoration of the group, through dramatic ideologies or projects of restoration (Volkan 2009, 212; Volkan 2021, 22).

It is equally important to remember that such narratives and projects do not necessarily need to be historically accurate. Elite-driven traumas can be based on faulty or inaccurate readings of history, and these inaccuracies may be intentional as much as they are unintentional. Nor do they even need to be contemporarily elaborated. They can be, and often are, based on parachronistic reasoning, whereby events of the past are interpreted in such a way as to serve the interests of the present, or more precisely, the interests of present-day actors (Juntunen 2017, 71). In such a set of circumstances, then, powerful political actors can effectively manipulate, create, and/or recreate (politically convenient) understandings of trauma. These can subsequently be used to justify a given political project or ideology as a necessity for the restoration of the nation’s dignity, and the resolution of its “trauma.” In such cases, traumas may be invented wholesale; alternatively, phenomena and events that may once have been considered “necessarily humbling” may come to be reinterpreted as traumatic humiliations and violations of dignity (Lindner 2001, 54).

This framework has previously been applied to study how politically useful narratives surrounding the (supposed) existence of a Hungarian cultural trauma regarding the Treaty of Trianon have been constructed by Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party (Toomey 2018). This previous study found that the top-down construction of such narratives allowed Orban to cast himself as the agent of the restitution of this trauma on behalf of the Hungarian nation (Toomey 2018, 101–102). This serves two purposes. First, it allows Orban to deflect criticism of himself from within and out with

the country as being attacks on Hungary itself (Jenne and Mudde 2012, 153). Secondly, Orban can claim credit for having attempted to resolve this trauma through the introduction (and constant re-introduction) of various policies, without ever truly removing the specter of Trianon from Hungarian life (Toomey 2018, 103). This process allows his continued (and increasingly authoritarian) rule of the country to be legitimated as being part of a grand project of national rejuvenation and renewal, in defiance of the country’s supposed political enemies.

Similarly, Brexit has been contextualized by key members of the British political elite (and particularly, members of the UK Conservative Party) as being a project of restitution for the United Kingdom following its “traumatic” loss of status. The fruits of this endeavor are likewise similar for the Conservatives as they are for Orban and Fidesz. Over the next several pages, through the analysis of political discourses from senior politicians and Conservative Party members, we map out how the loss of the UK’s international status and membership of the EU has been constructed as a series of “traumatic” events. We conclude by explaining the significance of this to developments in British politics, from 2015 to the present day.

The Road to Brexit—Embedding Traumatic Narratives in the United Kingdom–EU Relations

On June 23, 2016 the UK population voted to leave the EU. For many, including a large part of the Leave campaign, this came as a shock, yet it should not have been. The result was partly driven by social, cultural, political, and economic processes underway since before the United Kingdom joined the EC, not just by a few weeks of political campaigning. As Evans and Menon (2017, xiv) state, “... the seeds of Britain’s decision were sown over a far longer period” than the actual referendum campaign. Sobolewski and Ford (2020, 2) argue the referendum “was not so much a moment of creation, but rather a moment of awakening: when social and political processes long underway finally became obvious.” However, these social, cultural, political, and economic processes were aggravated and then activated by over 50 years of elite-driven Eurosceptic narratives, and the crafting of a narrative of trauma and humiliation by influential figures in the Labour and (primarily) Conservative parties. These narratives emphasized the UK’s declining global status after Second World War (WWII), through the loss of empire, the Suez debacle, and (for some) its membership of the EC/EU and the subsequent diminution of its sovereignty and independence.

At the outset of the “European project” in the 1950s, the United Kingdom declined to become fully involved, focusing instead on the Commonwealth and on its “special relationship” with the USA. This helped embed the narrative of, in today’s parlance, “Global Britain,” distinguished from continental Europe by virtue of geography, history, and psychology, but primarily through the careful curation and dissemination of certain interpretations of geographical and historical facts. As Wall (2020, 9) argues, and fitting with Juntunen’s (2017) arguments about parachronistic reasoning, it is not that these interpretations “... lack truth, but that they airbrush out inconvenient facts or simply ignore certain realities.” However, in the 1960s, when the United Kingdom was beginning to actively pursue participation in the EC, statements linking potential membership in the project of European integration to humiliating losses of status and sovereignty began to emerge more directly.

This is encapsulated by Hugh Gaitskell, former leader of the Labour Party, when he told his party conference in 1962 that the Macmillan-led Conservative government's negotiations to join the European Economic Community (EEC) would mean "the end of Britain as an independent nation state, the end of a thousand years of history" (Gaitskell quoted in Wall 2020, 9). For the "Anti-Marketeters," as they were known, joining the EC would mean the United Kingdom would have both its sovereignty and status restricted (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2016, 277). Others feared joining the EC would undermine the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth, and thereby its global standing (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2016, 277–8). Such discourses allowed the humiliation and trauma of events such as the loss of empire, the Suez debacle, and devaluation of the pound, to become transposed onto membership of the EC, and formed the basis for two central myths that would eventually shape the Brexit campaign: that participation in Europe implied a loss of status and sovereignty that was traumatic and humiliating, and stood in the way of a return to the UK's past as a great global power.

Losing sovereignty to supranational European institutions, and the UK's declining global standing, have thus been key myths of national trauma disseminated by elites to construct a grievance in pursuit of their own goals and interests. As Saunders noted, these narratives, perpetuated by Eurosceptics throughout the UK's membership and culminating in their articulation during the Leave campaign, framed EC/EU membership as either evidence of "... a moment of national surrender, fuelling 'a deep sense of loss of prestige', when Britain abandoned a heroic, global identity for a diminished, Continental role," or, worse, the primary cause of this decline (Saunders 2020, 1145). Contrastingly, many pro-Europeans argued that joining the EC would actually enhance prestige, contribute to ensuring the UK's status and power in the world, and enhance the UK's Special Relationship with the USA. While this demonstrates that the declinist narrative was (and still is) contested, it reflected on both sides of the European debate "... a nostalgic obsession with boyhood memories of a Victorian golden age of unrivalled power which had never really existed" (Tombs 2021, 31).

In the face of this emerging narrative of decline, the United Kingdom successfully joined the EC in 1973, with membership being endorsed in the 1975 referendum by 67.2 percent of the voters. However, this seemingly overwhelming victory masked trends that were to be commonplace through the UK's relationship with the EC/EU until 2016. First, while Europe was not a central concern for most of the UK population until the late 2000s, it was of paramount importance to the EC/EU's most ardent opponents (Davies 2020, 57–64). This illustrates the importance of highlighting the supply-side, or top-down, elements of populist messaging crafting "the other" and linking it to feelings of humiliation and cultural trauma. Second, this general lack of interest meant that the support in 1975 was "... unequivocal but... also unenthusiastic. Support for membership was wide but it did not run deep" (Butler and Kitzinger cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017b, 1). This partly explains how antipathy toward the EU could spread and take root so quickly once the 2016 referendum had been called. Third, opposition to the EC in the 1975 referendum again featured elite-driven narratives of humiliation and cultural trauma centered on the loss of sovereignty (c.f. Young 1998, 292), and which called for either the emergence of the Commonwealth as a "... surrogate for empire" (Stephens 2021, 174), or for the construction of an "Anglo-

sphere" of English-speaking white former colonies alongside the USA.

The humiliation of the loss of status was encapsulated a few years later by Margaret Thatcher, who had supported EC membership in 1975, in her response to one proposal in the June 1984 negotiations on the UK's budget rebate: "... how dare they treat Britain in this way? Have they forgotten that we saved all their skins in the war?" (Thatcher, quoted in Wall 2020, 168). These negotiations, consolidated by the EC voting reforms introduced as part of the Single European Act and the emergence of "Social Europe" (Dorey 2017), saw the Conservative Party (and Thatcher) shift to an increasingly (hard) Eurosceptic position. British Euroscepticism, and the narrative of humiliation and decline associated with (or caused by) EC/EU membership, further intensified in the 1990s in the wake of the signing of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). This manifested itself in the hardening of anti-EU sentiment within both the UK's main political parties (but especially parts of the Conservative Party), the launch of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in 1993, and increasingly hostile coverage of the EU across much of the tabloid and right-wing press.

During this time, both left and right-wing Eurosceptics perpetuated the narrative of the UK's humiliating loss of sovereignty and status at the hands of the EU. An example of this was Labour MP Tony Benn's claim during Parliamentary debates on the TEU that the House of Commons "... has lost confidence in democracy. It believes that it must be governed by someone else" (Benn, quoted in Evans and Menon 2017, 11). However, while the EU became a more prominent feature of media and political debates throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Usherwood 2018), such arguments remained primarily an elite issue. The EU continued to be of rather less interest to the majority of the population (Davies 2020). Even the debates in Westminster over the failed EU Constitutional Treaty of 2005 and the 2007 Lisbon Treaty scarcely resonated among the general public (Wall 2020, 265). What these political arguments did contribute to was a continued top-down elaboration of populist Eurosceptic narratives of humiliation and trauma surrounding the UK's ebbing sovereignty and status, a dynamic supplemented through the 1990s and 2000s by UKIP's incorporation of anti-establishment and anti-immigration narratives within its Euroscepticism (Tournier-Sol 2021, 381). Crucially, this development began the linkage of European integration, a low salience, second-order issue, to immigration, a high salience, first-order political issue (Tournier-Sol 2021, 381), and thereby sowed the seeds of hard Euroscepticism in key parts of the electorate which were later activated by David Cameron's promise of an in-out referendum on EU membership.

Cameron's promise was significantly driven by two inter-related political shifts; growing support for UKIP, and the increasing number of Eurosceptic MPs in the Conservative Party from 1997 onwards (which, after the 2001 election, constituted 90 percent of the party's MPs) (Bale, cited in Dorey 2017, 34). As such, by the time Cameron became leader of the Conservatives in 2005, the party was no longer divided between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics, but between "soft" and "hard" Eurosceptics (Dorey 2017, 36). Hardline Euroscepticism became "... the dominant discourse among the 2010 Conservative intake" (Smith 2012, 1289). This would lead to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's introduction of the 2011 European Union Act, designed to limit the United Kingdom's further engagement with European integration (despite the Liberal Democrats' pro-European ethos) (Wall 2020, 267).

This intended to appease the views of many Conservative MPs who had grown up with Thatcherism, and who cherry-picked her speeches for their trauma-based narratives of an encroaching European Superstate undermining British sovereignty, reach, and status.

What this section has illustrated is that these 40 years of top-down populist grand narratives led to the construction and elaboration of a British cultural trauma, linking membership of the EC/EU to the humiliation and trauma of the United Kingdom's decline through its loss of status and independence. This put in place the foundations of a broader Eurosceptic sentiment, which allowed these narratives to be successfully linked to a wider set of public frustrations after Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg Speech. This was aided, as Volkan suggests, by a sense of crisis with and across the EU regarding the Eurozone crisis, democracy and legitimacy, and, from 2015, the refugee crisis. In other words, it was not that the EU was suddenly seen as a source of humiliation and trauma; this was sown in the public subconscious for a long time but remained, until the 2010s, a lower salience issue. Once successfully connected to a range of first-order, high-salience issues, notably immigration but also identity, sovereignty, and economic circumstances, it flourished and drove the Leave vote in 2016.

David Cameron's Referendum Promise: from Bloomberg to Brexit

The aspiration to reassert Britain's status as a global power, as well as its semi-detachment from Europe and the need to redefine its relationship with the EU, permeated David Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech that formally made the promise of a referendum on UK membership of the EU. The speech identified three key issues challenging the EU: problems in the Eurozone, EU competitiveness, and the democratic deficit. While the speech made the case for continued EU membership on revised terms, its opening five minutes were imbued with discourses connected to historical grand narratives on sovereignty, status, and exceptionalism. Cameron contrasted the United Kingdom with continental Europe, arguing "... it's true that our geography has shaped our psychology. We have the character of an island nation—independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty" (Cameron 2013). He differentiated the United Kingdom further, arguing its approach to the EU "... is more practical than emotional," and that the EU "... is a means to an end... not an end in itself" (Cameron 2013). He also invoked historical and nostalgic narratives of the United Kingdom's sacrifices to help continental Europe:

"Over the years, Britain has made her own, unique contribution to Europe. We have provided a haven to those fleeing tyranny and persecution. And in Europe's darkest hour, we helped keep the flame of liberty alight. Across the continent, in silent cemeteries, lie the hundreds of thousands of British servicemen who gave their lives for Europe's freedom" (Cameron 2013).

Elsewhere, his speech resonated with many of the top-down populist narratives that have permeated the UK's relationship with the EU for almost 50 years. He argued the British people resented "interference in our national life" by EU rules, regulations, and legal judgments, that the degree of political integration was moving beyond "Britain's comfort zone," and that the United Kingdom people had not been given a say in these developments through a referendum (Cameron 2013). These arguments continued the elite-

driven narratives of a traumatic loss of sovereignty and status to the EU suffered by the British people. Cameron's speech again recalls Volkan's (2001, 88) arguments, with their emphasis on decades of intergenerational trauma transmission at a time of stress and crisis, shaping the overarching narrative about the UK's identity in relation to the EU. Crucially, 20 years on from the entry into force of the TEU, these narratives were finally capable of reigniting (or even igniting) this trauma among the wider population in large part due to the continually (and increasingly) Eurosceptic media coverage, the successful linkage by prominent Eurosceptics of the EU with the high salience issue of immigration, and the genuine problems facing the EU. Cameron concluded his speech arguing that "... democratic consent for the EU in Britain is now wafer thin" and, therefore, that he was in favor of a referendum (Volkan 2001)

The promise of a referendum after the 2015 election, following a renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU, was largely driven by Cameron's desire to placate the very vocal and rebellious hardline Eurosceptics within his own party and to take the wind out of the sails of UKIP, who were steadily gaining support in national opinion polls. Despite this, UKIP shocked the political establishment by winning the 2014 European Parliament election with 27.5 percent and returning 24 MEPs, the first time one of the two largest political parties had not won a national-level election (Hawkins and Miller 2014). This ensured that the promise of a referendum on EU membership was enshrined in the Conservative Party manifesto for the 2015 UK parliamentary election. Following a narrow victory, Cameron reached an agreement with the EU on its future relationship with the United Kingdom in February 2016, and subsequently set a date for a referendum on British membership of the EU. While the agreement touched on the high salience issue of sovereignty, by securing an opt-out from the ambition for an "ever closer union," and also provided guarantees that the United Kingdom would not be required to contribute to a Eurozone bailout, the agreement was widely derided as a failure and a climbdown by the Eurosceptic press (c.f. Slack, Stevens, Doyle, and Calderwood 2016; Heffer and Gutteridge 2016). During the actual referendum campaign, the deal barely featured. Instead, the more abstract arguments of sovereignty, status, independence, and rejuvenation, encapsulated by the slogan of "Take Back Control" dominated the Leave narratives. Cameron's decision to allow a referendum moved beyond the purely rhetorical construction of a narrative of trauma to more actively implying the existence of said trauma. Ironically, he was unable to reap any political benefits from this. His decision to position himself as a supporter of Remain meant that while he practically functioned as one of the "carriers" of this trauma, he would be unable to effectively position himself as an agent of this trauma's restitution.

Throughout the referendum campaign, the Leave camp deployed a continuous stream of trauma-based narratives invoking 50 years of humiliation inflicted on the United Kingdom by its membership of the EU, and the need to resolve this trauma through the reinstatement of independence from the EU. For instance, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Boris Johnson argued that the EU was another attempt to create a European superstate, and that Brexit "... will be vindicated by history... they [the EU and the Remain campaign] are fighting for an outdated absolutist ideology, and we are fighting for freedom" (Ross 2016). Theresa Villers, a cabinet minister who opted to support the Leave side in the referendum, argued "... joining the EU in the 70s was an admission of defeat based on the perception that Britain was destined

for chronic decline” (Villiers 2016). Similarly, Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, stated

“...a few days after the EU referendum it’s the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. We should never forget just how much generations have sacrificed. Our democracy is precious and our right to self-determination is one which has been given away by the political class to the EU...we must seize this chance, this opportunity to take it back” (Farage 2016).

The referendum, according to Farage, was “... a once in a lifetime opportunity to get back the independence and self-governance of this nation” (Farage, quoted in Dathan 2015)².

These narratives of humiliation and the loss of sovereignty and democracy combined with several others focusing on immigration and the economic costs of membership. Through this, the Leave camp conducted a highly effective campaign based on multiple and diffuse grievances and tropes of historical, political, and societal decline, which could only be reversed by leaving the EU. Gove summarized this when arguing, “... (f)or Britain, voting to leave will be a galvanizing, liberating, empowering moment of patriotic renewal” (Gove 2016). Such narratives marked the apex of a historically careless and presumptuous campaign to cast the EU as the embodiment or even the cause of Britain’s twentieth-century humiliation and decline. It was presumptuous, as it asserted that the country’s status within the EU and on the global stage was of pressing concern to British people in the twenty-first century (when in reality, as demonstrated throughout this piece, European issues were rarely of interest to a sizeable body of the electorate prior to the 2010s). They were parochronistic, as they presented a simplified and context-free grand narrative of British history (that participation in the EC/EU was solely and perpetually an exercise in abject humiliation and subjugation for a once-proud and powerful nation) to serve the interests of present-day factions within the Conservative party and associated political actors.³ However, they were also tremendously effective in allowing the Leave campaign to build a convincing message. Using these grand narratives of trauma and humiliation (and the need for national restitution in the face of this) to great effect, the Leave campaign won the referendum, with the UK public voting by 52 percent to 48 percent to leave the EU.

From May to Johnson and the Narrative of “Get Brexit Done”

In the aftermath of the result, it was quickly claimed that the Leave vote was largely driven by the so-called “left behinds,” the “pensioners, low-skilled and less well-educated blue-collar workers and citizens who have been pushed to the margins...” (Goodwin and Heath 2016). However, it became increasingly clear that the Leave vote was more complex in both who voted to leave, and why they did so. Indeed, according to Swales (2016, 2) and Bhambra (2017, 215), Leave voters were more likely to be middle class and affluent, and located in the country’s prosperous core of

Southern England (59 percent of the vote and 52 percent, respectively); and while the older working class and economically disadvantaged anti-immigration voters were supportive of Brexit, just 24 percent of Leave voters were from the lowest two social classes. Perhaps even more complex than working out the core constituents of the Leave vote was what the result entailed for the UK’s future relationship with the EU. Many difficult questions that had been largely swept aside in the simplistic arguments of the referendum campaign now had to be addressed, the most significant of which was what kind of Brexit the United Kingdom would pursue, and what the UK’s future relationship with the EU would be modeled on.

The arguments over these two interrelated meta-questions became as visceral as the referendum campaign itself and reflected the trauma-based narratives of the campaign. A primary element of this was the demand that Brexit embody a full restoration of British sovereignty, and a decisive break from the humiliation of being shackled to the EU. For the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, “Brexit mean[t] Brexit,” meaning a relatively hard Brexit of leaving the Single Market and the Customs Union. This had quickly become the preferred option of the Brexiteers, despite pronouncements by many of them (c.f. Hannan 2015) prior to the referendum that this would not be the outcome of a leave vote. Now, however, they argued a hard Brexit would be the only way to fully restore the UK’s sovereignty that had been eroded through EU membership and to achieve a truly independent “Global Britain.” In October 2016 May argued “... we are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration. We are not leaving to only return to the jurisdiction of the European court of Justice... We are leaving to become, once more, a fully sovereign and independent country” (May 2016). At the 2017 Munich Security Conference Boris Johnson (then Foreign Secretary) spoke of the UK’s “liberation from the EU,” claiming “... I’m afraid it’s an undeniable fact that we, the UK, has been unable to do, to run its own trade policy for 44 years” (Boffey 2017). Later that year Johnson warned that mirroring EU rules under May’s original Brexit negotiations, even if only in the transition period, would mean the United Kingdom “... would have gone from a member state to a vassal state” (Watts 2017), again rooting his arguments in the narrative of EU membership representing a cultural trauma which required resolution.

These narratives continued throughout the almost 4 years it took the United Kingdom to fully leave the EU. The depth of the divisions on what kind of Brexit was needed, how that could be achieved, and what kind of relationship the United Kingdom would have with the EU, saw both the Conservative and Labour parties turn on themselves. In 2016, the leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn survived a leadership challenge, while May, damaged by poor election results and a backlash to her 2018 deal with the EU, was replaced by Boris Johnson in 2019. Johnson set out to renegotiate May’s Brexit deal and “get Brexit done” by the delayed deadline of 31 October 2019. When putting his new Brexit deal to the House of Commons on 19 October, Johnson argued: “... this agreement provides for a real Brexit, taking back control of our borders, laws, money, farming, fisheries and trade, amounting to the greatest single restoration of national sovereignty in Parliamentary history” (Johnson 2019). He went on to argue the deal would allow the United Kingdom to “... believe in ourselves once again as an open, generous, global, outward-looking and free-trading United Kingdom” (Johnson 2019). The narratives of the humiliation and trauma of the loss of sovereignty to the EU and

²While Farage was not a member of the Conservative Party and as such falls somewhat outside of the scope of this paper, his statements on Brexit and on the UK’s global status frequently mirrored the declinist, trauma-infused narratives of Conservative pronouncements on EU membership and Brexit.

³It ought to be noted that while there were individual Labour MPs who supported Brexit, the vast majority of the party’s parliamentary representatives, and its broader membership, supported remaining in the EU (albeit sometimes unenthusiastically).

the return of the UK's status as a global power were again at the heart of his reasoning, and were central to the Conservatives' resounding election victory in December 2019.

“Not an End But a Beginning”—The Continuing Trauma of Brexit

The Conservative victory in the 2019 election and the subsequent ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement did not, as promised, mean a clean break from the EU for the country and a new adventure as “Global Britain.” Instead, it signaled a new phase in the UK's long process of growing and hardening Euroscepticism, based on a set of populist grand narratives and the elaboration of an elite-driven cultural trauma. 2020 was dominated by the negotiations on finalizing the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which would set out the UK's future relations with the EU, with sovereignty again resonating throughout the narratives of the government and the pro-Brexit media (c.f. [Frost 2020](#)). The TCA was finally signed on 30 December 2020 and the United Kingdom left the transition period at 11 p.m. on 31 December 2020. The United Kingdom leaving the transition period meant, Johnson argued, that Brexit was done.

Again, however, Brexit was not and is not done. Indeed, [Menon \(2021\)](#) refers to this as the “never-ending Brexit.” There remain a plethora of processes, negotiations, reviews, and transitions in political, social, and economic terms. Multiple transitional arrangements with the EU run until 2026, while negotiations and reviews in some cases will carry on until well beyond 2030 ([Usherwood 2021](#)). Even the TCA has not been fully implemented, with new checks continuing to be introduced until July 2022. Most contentious in all these agreements is the Northern Ireland Protocol, agreed by Johnson, that effectively put a customs border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland—something both May and Johnson had previously rejected as a possibility ([ITV News 2020](#)). The arguments over the Northern Ireland Protocol unleashed renewed trauma-related narratives of being subjugated to EU laws, rules, and courts. For instance, a report from the Conservative-backed Centre for Brexit Policy argued that “... the entire Withdrawal Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol are incompatible with UK Sovereignty,” while its Director General, John Longworth, wrote that the United Kingdom remained in “Teutonic chains,” paying “reparations” and facing a “Dunkirk” moment ([Grey 2021](#), 231).

At the time of writing, both sides had agreed the “Windsor Framework” amending the functioning of the protocol, in particular differentiating goods that are destined for Northern Ireland only and those possibly entering the Single Market ([European Commission and UK Government 2023](#)). But this was not before the United Kingdom had violated some of the protocol's provisions and even threatened to suspend it, with the EU threatening legal action in response. Once again, the arguments have been driven by the narrative of infringements on, and the subjugation of, the UK's sovereignty. In 2022, discussing a piece of UK legislation to unilaterally change the Northern Ireland Protocol, Bill Cash (a hardline Eurosceptic Conservative MP) argued that EU legislation affecting Northern Ireland was made by “... the 27 countries in the European Union, made in the Council of Ministers of the EU, and made behind closed doors and without even a transcript. That is how the United Kingdom was being subjugated by the EU since 1972” ([Cash 2022](#)).

Beyond this technical (often economic) “never-ending Brexit,” 31 January 2020 was also the beginning of a polit-

ical Long Brexit. This is evident in the emergence of a form of identity politics, flowing through parts of the UK electorate, which pits “true,” patriotic, Brexit-supporting Britons against a cosmopolitan “elite” seeking to undermine them. These discourses partially recall the grand narratives of humiliation and the loss of status and sovereignty, through the construction of a message that the UK's newly found independence is being chipped away at by those wanting a closer relationship with the EU. Similarly, identity politics are linked to the trauma narratives about changes in, or loss of, identity in the wake of immigration from the EU (and further afield), and nostalgic reflections on a rose-tinted history of status and power. This was evident in Boris Johnson's remarks in March 2022, when he controversially equated Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion with the UK's vote to leave the EU:

“...I know that it's the instinct of the people of this country, like the people of Ukraine, to choose freedom, every time. I can give you a couple of famous recent examples. When the British people voted for Brexit, in such large, large numbers, I don't believe it was because they were remotely hostile to foreigners. It's because they wanted to be free to do things differently and for this country to be able to run itself” ([Helm and Boffey 2022](#)).

This ongoing manipulation of Brexit as a point of liberation from the political, economic, and cultural trauma of EU membership reinforced a series of grand narratives that Johnson hoped would allow him to serve as Prime Minister for at least 10 years ([Skopeliti 2021](#)). Even after his fall from power in the summer of 2022, the continued centrality of Brexit was evident in statements made during the Conservative leadership campaign. Each candidate tried to outdo the others on how stridently they would work to “Keep Brexit Done,” or in the words of Penny Mordaunt, “... get Brexit re-done” (quoted in [Wood 2022](#)). After winning the leadership campaign, Liz Truss, in her brief tenure as PM, championed the Brexit Freedoms Bill to amend, repeal, or replace all EU legislation by the end of 2023.

Lately under PM Rishi Sunak, Brexit rumbles on, particularly in the debates on the Windsor Framework and the retained EU law bill, but also more widely in UK politics. Recent newspaper headlines have expressed fears that a Labour government would “... go soft on Brexit” ([Beckford 2023](#)). Indeed, the ongoing ructions associated with the Brexit process, including the divisions within UK society so clearly exposed by the EU referendum, the volatile and traumatic years of negotiating the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and the continuing narratives of getting Brexit done or undone, mean that Brexit itself risks becoming a cultural trauma. This is true for both sides of the political divide. Remain voters continue to believe that Brexit has grievously harmed the United Kingdom economically, politically, culturally, and in terms of its standing on the international stage. Meanwhile, Leave supporters fear that Brexit has not been fully achieved and/or that Brexit is at risk of being undone by “Remoaners.” In this sense, while Brexit was partially built on supply-side populist grand narratives of humiliation, efforts to overcome that trauma by leaving the EU may themselves spawn a new trauma—Brexit.

Conclusion

The analysis above shows that the top-down use of historical myths and grand narratives relating to trauma and humiliation surrounding Britain's supposed loss of status and

independence in the world following the end of the WWII have long been, and continue to be, central planks of the Conservative Party's messaging surrounding the country's relationship with the EU. Drawing on Juntunen's arguments about parachronistic reasoning, we argue this is based on an oftentimes partial, one-sided, and even inaccurate interpretation of the country's history. Through these top-down trauma narratives constructed by what Alexander calls "carrier groups," the UK's post-WWII experience is depicted as being one of constant and repeated humiliation, a humiliation and decline compounded and epitomized (and sometimes caused) by the country's membership of the EU.

Meanwhile, Brexit has been rhetorically constructed by elite groups as providing the ultimate tool for finally allowing the United Kingdom to break free of this cultural trauma and humiliation to forge a new, more prosperous future. According to such discourses, the subsequent and continued ructions over the Withdrawal Agreement, the TCA, and the Northern Ireland Protocol are portrayed as the result of an embittered and scorned EU seeking to artfully and cynically undermine both Brexit and the UK's potential prosperity. Thus, disagreements over the Northern Irish protocol, the "divorce bill," fisheries, and so on, all become part of a never-ending showdown between the United Kingdom and the EU to realize a "true" Brexit.

These discursive strategies served a number of purposes for Boris Johnson, his successors, and the Conservative Party. First, the Conservatives, broadly speaking, functioned as the carriers for the development and elaboration of these humiliation narratives. As described by Alexander, through their repeated assertions that the United Kingdom had been humiliated and otherwise subjugated through participation in the EC/EU, and their advocacy of Brexit as a panacea for this, the Conservatives effectively elaborated the cultural trauma they subsequently sought credit for seeking to resolve. Then through their monopolization of the pro-Brexit discursive space in British politics, they also became the guardians of a process of national rejuvenation by undoing the trauma of EU membership. Using this top-down populist construction, Johnson and his supporters in the Conservative Party were then able to claim to have been the ones to take the pivotal steps towards achieving this rejuvenation, through having "gotten Brexit done" (a linkage which they themselves have created). Additionally, this also allowed them for several years to deflect any criticisms from opponents within or out with the Conservative Party over any aspect of the Brexit process, or of how Brexit has actually manifested itself. These criticisms became represented as being the sour grapes of the Brexit referendum losers, or even the cynical attempts of the vanquished to selfishly undermine and prevent the United Kingdom from achieving its post-Brexit place in the sun (c.f. McBride 2022). Thus, opposition movements and politicians found themselves somewhat delegitimized and politically boxed in.⁴ As such, the elaboration of these traumatic narratives allowed Brexit to be deployed as a defensive shield against criticisms of Conservative Party leadership figures.

However, this defensive purpose was just one aspect of these narrative strategies, and it represented only one function of the Conservatives' approach. A more important element of them is the role they played in facilitating the Conservative government's sense of purpose. In truth, as

a response to a top-down and elite-driven trauma, Brexit in many ways is a solution in search of a problem; as has been discussed throughout this paper, while rarely popular, British membership of the EU was a low-salience, second-order political issue. However, through the construction of this narrative of humiliation, the stakes of the Brexit referendum, and Brexit as a project, were continuously escalated to the electorate as matters of crucial national rejuvenation. Given the somewhat artificial nature of this trauma, it allowed voters to project their own meanings of this national rejuvenation onto Brexit.

Through this, Boris Johnson and the Conservatives constructed a successful and powerful voter coalition, combining traditional Conservative voters in the English heartlands with pro-Brexit voters in traditionally Labour-voting constituencies in Wales and Northern England. The seemingly endless debates and discussions surrounding the ongoing disengagement of the United Kingdom from the EU served the purpose of keeping relevant the single issue that brought this coalition together. However, the consequence of this was that the debates and divisions Brexit spawned were also perpetuated. Thus, Brexit itself is becoming a cultural trauma that elites (on both sides) seek to resolve in order to achieve the ever-sought-after national rejuvenation. For those who see Brexit as incomplete, the humiliation is the continuing influence of the EU through various aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement, TCA, and Windsor Framework. For those who see Brexit as having grievously damaged the United Kingdom, the humiliation is in the economic, political, and cultural diminution of the UK's national and global standing. Given these entrenched and diametrically opposed positions, the issue of Brexit is likely to persist for years to come, and may itself become a cultural trauma passed down through intergenerational discourse and populist grand narratives.

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⁴Given that, following the collapses of UKIP and the Brexit Party, no notable opposition party remains that supported Brexit (outside of a few fringe members), it is likely that switching to a pro-Brexit stance would be viewed by the voters as pandering.

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