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DO HISTORIES OF EUROPE REPRESENT? CHALLENGING REPRESENTATIONALISM IN HISTORY

Abstract

Several case studies explore the plurality of historical accounts discussing past events of limited scope. In this paper, I focus on two historical works about the history of Europe. I show that even works of this large a scale offer specific perspectives on how to approach the past. After analysing two historical books I explore the background and the views of their authors which motivate their accounts. My examination implies it is problematic to see historical works as straightforward representations, for it is implausible to analyse them in terms of a correspondence between historical texts and the past reality. Hence, I use the case study to challenge representationalism. Instead, I argue, history should be approached differently, along the lines of non-representationalism focusing on the concrete steps historians take, on the special origin of their works and specific motivation informing their accounts.

Keywords: histories of Europe, historical works, plurality in history, representationalism, non-representationalism

There exist competing histories of the fall of the Roman Empire or the French Revolution. However complex these events are, they have a rather limited time span, although it is far from simple to clearly date or localise them. But what is the situation with respect to historical works dealing with large-scale histories of whole countries or bigger regions? Is plurality a feature of more global histories as well? Hypothetical considerations may go both ways. Since larger historical works build on what we know from historical works about smaller scale events, plurality should be transmitted from a limited to a more global dimension. On the other hand, is it not possible that larger historical works covering centuries and



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large regions limit themselves to basic facts, less controversial conclusions and provide more neutral guides to our past reality? Hence, the question: Are more global historical works freed from heated interpretative disputes or, on the contrary, do they promote distinctive viewpoints?

In this paper, I examine two historical works dealing with the history of Europe: *Europe: A History* from 1996 (a corrected edition from 1998), by Norman Davies, offering a global history of Europe from “the ice age to the Cold War” and *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present* from 2013, by Brendan Simms, discussing events from the 15th century to the European Union.¹ The two books were written by respected historians of our times. In his *Europe: A History*, Welsh-Polish historian and professor emeritus at the University of London provides a global account of “European” history from prehistory to German reunification and the collapse of the Soviet Union. A more recent book with a more limited time-span is the work of the professor of the history of international relations at the University of Cambridge. In my paper, I show that even historical works of this scale offer strong interpretative stances and participate in a pluralistic debate on how to approach our past. I intentionally write about how *to approach* our past rather than how *to represent* our past, since I use the debate about histories of Europe to make a philosophical point about the nature of historical works. Namely, I challenge representationalism in history, according to which historical works should be viewed as representations of past realities. Hence, my paper has two related goals: to document the plurality of interpretations regarding history of Europe and to use this example to challenge the view that historical works are representations of the past.

Since plurality plays an important role in what I say below, let me briefly discuss this concept. Various historical texts usually offer different interpretations of past events, for instance, focusing on different aspects. This is not surprising. A more interesting and relevant case of plurality, however, arises when various accounts offer competing/incompatible or at least partially competing/incompatible interpretations. It may, of course, be the case that even these competing accounts agree on several aspects and there is an important overlap between them. The overlap may concern some basic facts or even some interpretative conclusions. Yet (partially) competing or incompatible accounts, which constitute the most interesting and relevant cases of plurality, must contain at least an element of incompatibility. This means that one of the accounts presents a conclusion or an interpretation that is in conflict with the conclusions or interpretations of another account. These “conflicts” may take various forms. For instance, the first account emphasises that to explain the event under discussion we need to locate it within a political context, whereas the second account prefers an economic context. In theory, one may offer a third account placing the event within both contexts, but since the first account presents the political context as most important and the

¹ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

second account stresses the priority of economic foundations, the two accounts offer incompatible interpretations. The clearest cases of plurality occur when historians differ not only when it comes to the crucial context or primary factors, but when it comes to openly conflicting interpretations. For instance, one account presents an event as a legitimate, while another as an illegitimate action; one account presents an event as a sudden change, while another as a gradual transformation; one account makes agent A responsible for a given action, while another makes agent B responsible for the very same action etc. Since the issue of plurality is quite complex and I believe it is more instructive to discuss it using concrete examples, let me end this brief theoretical comment with the observation that when I talk about plurality here, I have a certain element of incompatibility in mind.

TWO BOOKS, TWO EVENTS

Let me start with two historical events, the Prague Spring and the French Revolution. The 1960s was a special period in the history of Europe.² It was characterised by a wave of revolutionary outbursts in various countries. Czechoslovakia, located in the Soviet bloc, also experienced a series of extraordinary events. In January 1968, the Secretary General of the local communist party, Antonín Novotný, was replaced by the younger and reformist Slovak communist Alexander Dubček, who, with his team, managed to introduce various liberalising measures. This development, called the Prague Spring (*Pražská jar*), lasted for a couple of months, until Moscow intervened by force in August 1968. Half a million soldiers from the “friendly” countries of the Soviet bloc, from Poland to Hungary, participated in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the whole movement was swiftly crushed. How is this event accounted for in the two books under comparison?

Norman Davies divides his book into twelve chapters and in the last one “XII Divisa et Indivisa. Europe Divided and Undivided, 1945–1991” (which is also the final part of the book, there is no additional conclusion, only various appendices), he tells the story of what happened in Europe after World War II. Step by step, in sections of the last chapter focusing on the end of the Grand Alliance, Western Europe, neutral states, Eastern Europe, East-West relations/Cold War and integration and disintegration, he covers, sometimes in more detail and sometimes very briefly, developments in various countries and regimes, from Germany to Albania. While discussing Soviet bloc countries after Stalin, he introduces the Prague Spring. First, however, he provides a more general context:

In the second, post-Stalinist phase (1953–68), the Soviet satellites worked their way towards a stage that has been variously labelled as ‘national communism’ or ‘polycentrism’. Each of

² On various aspects of 1960s see, for instance, A. James McAdams, Anthony P. Monta, *Global 1968: Cultural Revolutions in Europe and Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2021); Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

the fraternal parties was to claim the right to fix its own separate 'road to socialism'. The CPSU [the Communist Party of the Soviet Union] reserved the right to intervene by force if the gains of socialism were in danger. 'Gains of socialism' was a codeword for communist monopoly power and for loyalty to the Kremlin.

In the climate of uncertainty fostered by the in-fighting of Moscow's collective leadership, the more courageous elements took matters into their own hands.³

Subsequently Davies presents examples of these "more courageous elements"; he tells us about the developments in Poland, Hungary and later, in four paragraphs, he writes about what happened in Czechoslovakia (a condensed selection is here):

[...] He [Antonín Novotný] was finally overturned by a coalition in the Politburo of Slovaks disgruntled with Czech dominance and Czechs eager for systemic reform. The new leader, Alexander Dubček (1927-93), was a mild-mannered Slovak communist, the only General Secretary in the history of the bloc to be endowed with smiling eyes. True to character, he declared for 'socialism with a human face'.

The Prague Spring burst into bud with intoxicating vigour. Dubček and his team were planning the imposition of reforms from above. But they suspended censorship at an early stage, and the populace was brought into the frenzy of joyful debate. [...] Nineteen years later, when Mikhail Gorbachev's spokesman was asked what was the difference between the Prague Spring and Gorbachev's programme of *perestroika*, he answered 'nineteen years'. The Czechoslovak experiment struggled against the odds for barely seven months. At first, it seemed that an accommodation could be reached. [...]

At dawn on 21 August 1968, half a million soldiers drawn from all the Warsaw Pact countries except Romania poured back into Czechoslovakia without warning [...] The surprise and the saturation were overwhelming; resistance was minimal. [...]

The invasion of Czechoslovakia was far less brutal than the suppression of the Hungarian Rising. But it unfolded on the world's television screens; and its impact on world opinion was enormous. [...] ⁴

Brendan Simms also cursorily touches on the Prague Spring in two paragraphs of the penultimate chapter of his book "7. Partitions, 1945–73" (the last chapter of his book is called "8. Democracies, 1974–2011" and there is also a conclusion in his book). The chapter is devoted to a discussion of the new world order and the division between "a democratic west and a communist east".⁵ Simms tells us what happened after World War II and when he approaches the 1960s, he shares a more general explanation of revolutionary happenings:

The Vietnam War, the Sino-Soviet split and the Six Day War caused an earthquake in domestic politics in Europe and around the world. In the course of 1968–9, the cities of western Europe and the United States erupted as students hurled themselves against the police, the political and educational establishment, and increasingly against society as

³ Davies, *Europe*, 1101–1102.

⁴ Davies, *Europe*, 1105–1106.

⁵ Simms, *Europe*, 382.

a whole. The ‘Sixty-Eighters’, as they came to be known, were a diverse coalition of feminists, civil rights workers, student activists and Maoists, motivated by a broad antipathy to western modernity [...]⁶

Thus, Simms presents international relations as the background and as being at the root of various student movements in Europe. He is very explicit in this respect, for instance, about the situation in Germany, the country his book revolves around. “Foreign policy was thus at the heart of the revolutionary project in Germany, even more than elsewhere.”⁷ But, as we learn, the context for the Prague Spring was not that different. He starts the two paragraphs about the events in Czechoslovakia:

The international situation also provoked turbulence inside the Soviet bloc. [Then, Simms says more on what happened in Kremlin.] Moscow looked anxiously on developments in Czechoslovakia, where liberal elements in the party took advantage of the new spirit of détente to challenge hardliners. In January 1968, the reliable Antonín Novotný was replaced as First Secretary of the party by the reformist Alexander Dubček. Over the next months, he introduced a series of liberalizing measures [...] which became known as the ‘Prague Spring’. Throughout the summer Dubček – mindful of the Hungarian experience – repeatedly assured the Soviet Union that he had no intention of leaving the Warsaw Pact, but Moscow remained deeply worried that – as in the west – the spark of subversion would leap across national boundaries and created a conflagration it could not control.

In the end, none of the protest movements succeeded in toppling a government. The Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring by force in August 1968; after intensive ‘fraternal consultations’, the Czech party withdrew its reform programme. Three months later, the Soviet Union issued what has become known as the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’, announcing that it would never allow any ‘socialist’ state to abandon socialism. [...] The protesters did not get anywhere in the west, either.⁸

These two short discussions of the Prague Spring differ in a number of respects. Whereas Davies locates the events within his account of developments within the Soviet bloc after the death of Stalin and does not seem to be interested in discussing the 1960s globally, Simms’ framework is wider. Simms examines the general revolutionary mood in Europe as a result of international politics. For him, the Vietnam War and other events on the world stage provide the correct context for the 1960s, and the Prague Spring seems to be just one of the variations of the turbulent movements in Europe. Moreover, Simms is quite clear when it comes to causal network. It is international politics and clashes on the wider or even global scene, which affect what is going on at the national level. Of course, the link is not completely simplistic and one-directional because Simms admits that geopolitics influences domestic events and consequently changes in various countries may have an impact on foreign relations: “That said, the international

⁶ Simms, *Europe*, 445.

⁷ Simms, *Europe*, 446.

⁸ Simms, *Europe*, 446–447.

situation did lead to immediate domestic changes in the west, which in turn led to important geopolitical shifts.”⁹ Still, there is a remarkable priority regarding international relations in his account and an effort to decipher causal links.

Davies, on the other hand, is not very clear when it comes to causation. He offers a richer and more lively narration about various happenings. He connects what happened in different countries in the Soviet bloc and he makes various retrospective comments (e.g., how Gorbachev’s *perestroika* could be linked to the Prague Spring). He also likes to point out to peculiarities, to quote interesting remarks from the actors or the press and, finally, he covers a much broader and multidimensional chunk of past reality. He is interested not only in the political arena but also in the economic dimension, everyday life, cultural developments etc. Nevertheless, his multilayered account cannot be reduced to a simple causal explanation of the Prague Spring. In fact, it seems in his account that many events just happen, one after another, and even though he locates them within a certain web or within a telling context (the Prague Spring is contextualised as one of the courageous steps in the post-Stalinist Soviet bloc), he is not as open about the determining factors as Simms is.

Let me turn now to my second example, to a very popular and contentious event in the history of historical writing. Already from the times of Edmund Burke’s critical pamphlet, many authors tried to identify the causes of or express their views on the revolutionary events in France. Unsurprisingly, this event is also covered in Simms’ and Davies’ books.

Simms starts his chapter “3. Revolutions” with a note on the cooperation and fights between such powers as Bourbon France, Habsburg Austria, Prussia etc., which resulted in the Seven Years War (1756–63). As he claims: “Below the surface, moreover, the Seven Years War laid two charges which detonated with spectacular effect in the last quarter of the century.”¹⁰ The first were the events leading to the creation of the United States and the second was the French Revolution:

It was during the Seven Years War, too, that Frenchmen began the long national debate on Bourbon grand strategy, and the domestic arrangements necessary to support their great-power ambitions, which culminated in the Revolution of 1789. All this resulted in new geopolitical, constitutional and ideological fault-lines in Europe and across the Atlantic, as states canvassed different models of internal organization in order to make themselves more competitive on the international stage. [...] The focal point of this struggle remained Germany and the Low Countries. Whoever controlled that space would dominate the continent and thus the world.¹¹

As so often in his book, Simms presents the French Revolution within the context of and as a result of the struggle between great European powers. What is a more concrete link and mechanism between geopolitics and the revolutionary events?

⁹ Simms, *Europe*, 448.

¹⁰ Simms, *Europe*, 107.

¹¹ Simms, *Europe*, 107.

Simms informs us that by 1786 France had great financial problems, which prevented her from intervening when Prussia invaded Holland in September 1787. "This was the last straw for a political nation whose patience with the failures of Bourbon foreign policy had worn thin and resulted in a profound crisis of legitimacy for the *ancien régime* at home."¹² Thus, to simplify, given the need to deal with the finances to remain a great power in geopolitics, internal changes were necessary. As Simms puts it at various places with slightly different emphases:

The implication of this argument was clear: the increased taxation which French power ambitions required could only be effected at the price of more political participation.

In other words, because the monarchy refused to go to war in defence of its strategic interests in Europe, it was forced into confrontation with its own people at home.

The wave of revolutionary change which swept France in late 1789 and throughout 1790 had many causes, but the principal driving force was a determination to make French society better able to support the re-establishment of national greatness on the European scene. Central to this was the role of the nobility. In the course of the year, reformers abandoned their hope that the aristocracy could be persuaded to embrace their martial destiny once more. Instead, in early August the National Assembly renounced all feudal privileges with a view to creating a social order based on merit rather than birth.¹³

Simms puts it openly. The French Revolution should be placed and accounted for within the context of geopolitics. Bourbon France was too financially exhausted to remain an important player in the continent and beyond. To counter this weakening, something had to be done and since the aristocracy did not seem powerful enough, societal changes came to facilitate France empowering in the broader context.

How does Davies approach the very same events in France? First, one must mention that he devotes a whole chapter (84 pages long) to the French Revolution (dated by him 1789–1815). This gives him enough space to focus both on various details and aspects of the events, as well as the ability to make several more general observations. His opening remark concerns the concept of revolution itself, which he explicitly links to what happened in France: "Indeed, this was the event which gave the word 'Revolution' its full, modern meaning: that is, no mere political upheaval, but the complete overthrow of a system of government together with its social, economic and cultural foundations."¹⁴ And this multidimensional approach seems to be a distinctive point of his account later on. While Davies claims that a proper outline of revolutionary events must focus on causes, events themselves and their consequences,¹⁵ and, in fact, he does deal with all these items, let me limit my attention to causes. To simplify his rich discussion, it is possible to centre his explanation around three points.

¹² Simms, *Europe*, 141.

¹³ Simms, *Europe*, 141, 142, 142–143.

¹⁴ Davies, *Europe*, 675.

¹⁵ Davies, *Europe*, 678.

First, that which influenced events in France in the last years of the 18th century was her involvement in the War of American Independence, and the impact had two aspects: financial and ideological/anti-monarchical: “For one thing, it pushed France’s financial crisis towards the brink. It also made Frenchmen, and others, consider their own predicament: if poor old bumbling George III was to be classed as a tyrant, how should one classify the other monarchs of Europe?”¹⁶ Second, Davies also notes the geopolitical background to the events. Russia, representing old-fashioned monarchy, was getting stronger in the east, and, ultimately, it seemed inevitable that “the revolutionary era would eventually culminate in a titanic clash between France and Russia.”¹⁷ Finally, Davies devotes a great deal of attention to developments in industry, society, demography, literature and philosophy. And all of this is in his view linked to the French Revolution:

Beyond or beneath everyday politics, there were indicators that deep forces invisible on the ordered surface of late eighteenth-century Europe were somehow getting out of control. One source of anxiety was technological: the appearance of power-driven machines with immense destructive as well as constructive potential. The second source was social: a growing awareness of ‘the masses’, the realization that the teeming millions, largely excluded from polite society, might take their fate into their own hands. The third source was intellectual: a rising concern both in literature and in philosophy with the irrational in human conduct.¹⁸

Interestingly, in the end Davies adds a note “Historians are pressed to decide whether these developments [...] were causes of the revolutionary upheaval, or merely its companions and contributors”,¹⁹ so he is not completely clear whether this last group is here just for consideration or he takes them seriously as influential factors. Still, his detailed discussion of technological, social and intellectual trends points to the latter.

Again, to compare Simms and Davies, one clearly notices that Simms provides a clear-cut account with one crucial focal point, while Davies presents a much richer and more multidimensional explanation. For Simms, the events are about geopolitics, about making a weakened France great again (MFGA). Since the old regime is unable to contribute, new groups within society make moves and, indeed, revolution takes place on the way to empowering France. Davies’ account is more nuanced, hesitant (he discusses various explanations from financial to social and considers their loopholes) and, in the end, he does not point to one decisive causal trajectory. Rather, he considers various causes or factors, from more traditional political (combining financial and ideological elements) via geopolitical to technological, demographic and intellectual.²⁰

¹⁶ Davies, *Europe*, 678.

¹⁷ Davies, *Europe*, 679.

¹⁸ Davies, *Europe*, 679.

¹⁹ Davies, *Europe*, 679.

²⁰ As one of the reviewers rightly pointed out to me, this comparison of two accounts raises the issue of evaluation. Should we prefer richer accounts? Should we value if a historian does not

HISTORIES OF EUROPE

There exist several histories of Europe. From the older authoritative and comprehensive work of H. A. L. Fisher *A History of Europe* (1935) and the narrower work of Charles Seignobos *A Political History of Europe from 1814* (1900) dealing with the 19th century to works promoting the idea of common European identity (Jean-Baptiste Duroselle *Europe: A History of its People*, 1990) or even an unusual philosophical history of Europe (Simon Glendinning *Europe: A Philosophical History*, 2021).²¹ Here, however, I examine the accounts by Norman Davies and Brendan Simms. As has already become clear from the above discussions about the Prague Spring and the French Revolution, the two books differ not only in their scope but, more importantly, in their position and emphasis.

Bearing in mind these two examples, let me turn now to a more general examination and comparison of these works. Brendan Simms reveals one important point of his book immediately in the title. The history of Europe, in his rendering, is a history based on conflict and alliance, on a fight between powers in the region; it is a struggle for supremacy in Europe.²² Throughout the whole book, the reader encounters narration about various tensions, battles, wars, about the ambitions to dominate, and about the rises and falls of European powers. The mastery of Europe seems to be *telos* for the crucial players in the geopolitical arena. Moreover, the struggle for domination is not random and region-blind. It is one of the main points of Simms' book that more or less the area of present Germany or what used to be the Holy Roman Empire is in the centre of European international politics. Various empires and powers over the centuries try to dominate Europe thanks to controlling this heart of Europe. Thus, Germany is Simms' focus, whether he discusses developments centuries ago – "The centrality of Germany was reflected in the fact that the two most important European

limit an account to a mono-causal explanation? These are important and interesting questions about evaluation. I am afraid, however, that they would require a separate paper. Moreover, I tend to think that even the most interesting philosophical account of evaluation must draw on concrete cases and evaluation of fellow historians. Therefore, I include below comments from various reviews to show how historians themselves approach this issue.

²¹ Charles Seignobos, *A Political History of Europe since 1814* (New York: [s.n.], 1900); Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher, *A History of Europe* (Boston: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1935); Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "Review of Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Europe: A History of its People*," *European History Quarterly* 24 (1994): 123–126; Simon Glendinning, *Europe: A Philosophical History, Part 1 & Part 2* (London: Routledge, 2021).

²² Simms' title seems to be an allusion to A.J.P. Taylor's book *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*. As Richard J. Evans notes in his review of Simms' book, Taylor begins his own book: "In the state of nature Hobbes imagined violence was the only law, and life was «nasty, brutish and short». Though individuals never lived in this state of nature the Great Powers of Europe have always done so." For Evans, Simms takes this principle "rather too much to heart" and applies it where it does not fit. See Richard J. Evans, "Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy by Brendan Simms – review", *Guardian* (23 May 2013). Moreover, as it was pointed out to me, Simms' emphasis on the struggle between superpowers in history is close to offensive realism of John J. Mearsheimer. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

settlements [Treaties of Augsburg 1555 and Westphalia 1648] revolved around the future of the Holy Roman Empire”²³ – or he deals with more recent events such as events of the 1960s – “The key, however, was Germany. Many of the most prominent revolutionaries, as de Gaulle observed with asperity, were German, [...] ‘It was in Berlin,’ one of the French protesters later remarked, ‘that we learned how to demonstrate in the streets’”.²⁴

Hence, the history of Europe as *a struggle for supremacy and the centrality of Germany* are the two crucial elements in Simms’ book. As he puts it in the conclusion:

The fundamental issue has always been whether Europe would be united – or dominated – by a single force: the Universal Monarchy attributed to Charles V[...]; the caliphate of Suleiman the Magnificent and his successors; the continental bloc which Napoleon so nearly achieved [...] In each case the central area of contention was Germany: because of its strategic position at the heart of Europe, because of its immense economic and military potential and – in the Early Modern period – because of the political legitimacy which its imperial title conferred.²⁵

Yet critical reviewers remark that this uniformity in his text negatively affects the book:

[Simms’ book] enumerates wars, treaties and alliances in chronological order, explaining time and again how they interrelate. This type of history-writing is not modulated: it hardly changes pitch, and it never creates a tension to be relieved. The reason is that Simms has no ‘history’ to narrate. His agenda is to show that ‘the principal security issues faced by Europeans have remained remarkably constant over the centuries’ (p. xxvii).²⁶

Or, as another reviewer observes, Simms “exaggerates the role of Germany and the constancy of issues and ideas.”²⁷ So why this focus or should one say even obsession? Both the conclusion of his book on Europe and his other output²⁸ nicely articulate and clarify his position. Simms considers “the German problem” to be at the heart of the European politics of his time (the book was published in 2013, the public talk at the LSE from November of the same year, and the public talk at the AEI from April 2014) and of European history. Again, the titles of his

²³ Simms, *Europe*, 36.

²⁴ Simms, *Europe*, 446.

²⁵ Simms, *Europe*, 530–531.

²⁶ Benoit Majerus, Pit Péporté, “Review of *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present*,” *The English Historical Review* 130, 544 (June 2015): 773.

²⁷ Jeremy Black, “Review of *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present*,” *Journal of World History* 26 (March 2015): 210.

²⁸ See, especially, his paper on the future of the EU (Brendan Simms, “Towards a Mighty Union: How to Create a Democratic European Superpower,” *International Affairs* 88 (2012): 49–62), his talk at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE talk available as a podcast) and his talk at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI talk available at YouTube).

public presentations reveal and summarise his approach: “European Problems, the German Question and Anglo American Solutions” (LSE talk) and “The European Question, the German Problem, and Anglo American Solution” (AEI talk). First, for Simms there are big problems in how the EU is organised and what its role is, how it deals with or rather how it cannot effectively deal with various issues in international politics. Therefore, he is worried when exploring the state of the EU. To face the problematic present, he provides a historical account and shows that what he calls “the German problem” is nothing new. It has been present in European history since at least the 15th century. The huge area and resources of German lands at the heart of Europe were always the issue of contention and rivalry among the powers. Hence, for Simms, the past lessons show us the roots of the current situation. On the one hand, a rich and economically prosperous Germany at the centre of the EU and, on the other, a “power” avoiding too much involvement in international politics. It is possible to conclude that Simms relates the history of Europe to show that recent EU problems are nothing new and they should be solved, not by repeating old mistakes, but by applying what he calls the Anglo-American constitutional model. To put it into a dichotomy. Old-style weak and relaxed unions constructed on the model of the Holy Roman Empire will not get us anywhere, and that is why we should apply the superior and stronger Anglo-American model to the EU. That is why his punchline is: “What we urgently need now is not a European Britain, but a British Europe.”²⁹

Let me simplify the examination of Simms’ book. Simms sees the current EU as weak and facing various challenges. To overcome this “crisis”, he proposes a specific and very concrete³⁰ vision for the EU: it needs to be more centralised, following the Anglo-American model, and it needs to avoid past mistakes such as leaving its heart (Germany) passive and weak. That is why Simms tells us the story of Europe’s past as primarily a story of struggle for supremacy over German lands.

²⁹ Simms, “Towards a Mighty Union,” 62.

³⁰ To illustrate what details he considers in one of his articles from 2012 when thinking about the EU future: “The task of achieving this new Union [the EU following his preferred model] must therefore fall to a new pan-European party which aims to gain a majority in the European Parliament in the 2014 election or, in the event of that institution ceasing to function, to win majorities in the respective national legislatures (or both). Once a majority in Brussels has been secured, and in the event of the national governments refusing to accept the democratically expressed will of the electorate for a new federal Union, the party would use its power to reject the new commission put forward by the member states until its objectives were met. The party would work with any existing grouping in the Parliament willing to support the transformation of Europe into a democratic federal union. It should welcome the establishment of other democratic pan-European parties as the first step towards the creation of a pan-European party landscape. The new party should be called the «Party of Democratic Union» to accentuate the key twin themes of democracy and union, and should avoid the appellation «European», now sadly toxic. The party language at Union level should be English. It would be a constitutional party in that it would abide by the democratically expressed will of the citizens of Europe, but it would be revolutionary in that it would aim at the overthrow of existing forms of national sovereignty” Simms, “Towards a Mighty Union,” 62.

When it comes to Norman Davies' book, he does not seem to offer such a narrowly focused account. He presents instead a multidimensional story not only of politics, but also of social changes, technology, arts, philosophy etc. Is there, however, a central topic or key theme? While Simms puts forward his positions, points and views in his conclusion, Davies starts his book with a relatively rich introduction commenting on the historical craft, on how history is taught, on Eurocentrism and on many other things. And there seem to be several crucial points and topics that shape his presentation of the history of Europe. First, Davies is very explicit about his task "to shift the subject's centre of gravity away from conventional but fundamentally eccentric focus on Western Europe."³¹ It happens very often that in history books, only the main powers of the West are discussed. Usually, much is left out: - no Scandinavia, no Poland, no Balkans. Davies, a Welshman, who studied in Kraków, who has a Polish wife, and also Polish citizenship, knows very well how it is when the "peripheries" (if large and important parts of Europe could be labelled in this way) are ignored. Hence, his key interest is to challenge the traditional approach focusing on France or Britain supplemented by relations with Russia. His ambition is to incorporate the history of the Eastern part of Europe (and other overlooked regions) into European history. For historians can ignore neither large and significant states from non-Western Europe such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth nor minor nations which are or were parts of European history.³² This aspect of his book is also welcomed in some reviews: "This, and the complete integration of Eastern with Western European history (with more than a cursory nod to the histories of the South and the North) are some of the many excellent features of Davies' history."³³

Second, Davies is a critic of what he calls "the allied scheme of history". This is the view of the western allies who are (considering the cooperation in WWII) willing to accept and be lenient towards Russia. The scheme manifests itself in presenting the Western civilisation "as the pinnacle of human progress"; in promoting "a demonological fascination with Germany, the twice-defeated enemy"; in facilitating a "romanticised" view of Russia and the Soviet Union, complemented with a tacit acceptance of Russia's dominance over the Eastern sphere of the divided Europe.³⁴ Since Davies rejects such an approach to history, he is

³¹ Norman Davies, "How I conquered Europe," *New Statesman* 125, 4315 (1996–1997).

³² Davies is known also for his historical works on Poland and for a work on "vanished" countries such as Etruria or Ruthenia. See Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2011). The latter book was published with subtitles *The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* and *The Rise and Fall of States and Nations*. Both nicely capture his inclination to pay attention to marginal as well as his tendency to emphasize change and decay in history. See also quotation on Heraclitus below.

³³ Patricia Clavin, "Norman Davies, *Europe: A History*," *European History Quarterly* 28, 1 (1998): 131.

³⁴ Davies, *Europe*, 40. In her interesting review, Anne Applebaum explores this aspect of Davies' book in more detail and she identifies it as one of the reasons why there appeared negative and even "nasty" reviews of his book. See Anne Applebaum, "Against the old clichés. A Review of *Europe: A History* by Norman Davies," *The New Criterion* 15, 9 (May 1997).

repeatedly suspicious about pro-Russian trends both in history writing and in actual events. As Richard J. Evans notes in his review: "There is no doubt where Davies locates the chief repository of separate development in the East: the antithesis of his thoughtful sympathy for Poles and other eastern peoples appears in his almost unrelievedly hostile presentation of the Russian state."³⁵

Finally, it seems Davies does not look for laws of development in history, but embraces a kind of "one damned thing after another" approach to history. There are several places in the book where he makes clear how temporary and prone to change developments are. Or, as one of the reviewers of his *Vanished Kingdoms* notes, the book is based on "the assumption that all political entities will eventually vanish."³⁶ Davies aptly expresses it while discussing ancient philosophers:

From the historian's point of view, Heraclitus was probably the most important of these pioneers. Heraclitus reasoned that everything in the world is subject to perpetual change and decay: also that change is caused by the inevitable clash of opposites – in other words, by dialectics. In so doing he unwrapped the two basic ideas of the historian's trade: change over time, and causation.³⁷

Thus, by providing a rich narration with interesting digressions, which do not make risky and overarching conclusions about the course of history, Davies embraces a position putting forward individual events, change and decay. In his book, the history of Europe is neither about simplistic trajectories nor about bombastic endpoints; it is about specific events and actions, about plans, accomplishments and failures, about moves, countermoves and adjustments.

To compare the two books, one must note how differently they approach the history of Europe. Simms seems to be telling a story of Europe to promote his solution for European problems. It is clear there is an agenda behind his dominantly mono-causal explanation stressing geopolitical factors. Davies, on the contrary, does not seem to have such a reductionist view of the past. For him, history is not about one set of determining factors, rather, it is full of developments within various dimensions. Still, he puts forward his own project of reintroducing the East back into European history, and of curing a naïve Russophilia.

PLURALITY IN HISTORY

What do these differences tell us about writing history? Davies presents the Prague Spring in the context of a thaw in the Soviet Bloc; Simms links it to more global geopolitics. Davies gives us a multifaceted account of the French Revo-

³⁵ Richard J. W. Evans, "Doing the Continental," *The New York Review of Books* (May 15, 1997).

³⁶ Pit Péporté, "Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe, by Norman Davies," *The English Historical Review* 128, 531 (April 2013): 401.

³⁷ Davies, *Europe*, 122.

lution, discussing political, financial, technological, social and intellectual conditions and factors, whereas Simms clearly points to an ambition to make France great on the international stage as being behind the turmoil. In general, the former historian tells a rich and picturesque story of what happened in Europe (both West and East) without insisting on one determination, while the latter does just the opposite, emphasising the priority of international politics and depicting most of what happened as the struggle for supremacy in Europe.

Does this mean that only one of these accounts is the correct one? Should we try to pick one of them and reject the other? Is there just one way of being faithful to what happened in the past?

First, at least some philosophers, theoreticians of history and historians welcome plurality in history.³⁸ They do not see it as a pathology, but as a reality we need to face. Of course, it makes historians and philosophers reflect on the nature of history, but it certainly does not make them try to avoid it. Davies himself is quite vocal about plurality at several places in the book. He notes in the preface: “Europe’s past, however, can only be recalled through fleeting glimpses, partial probes, and selective soundings. It can never be recovered in its entirety. This volume, therefore, is only one from an almost infinite number of histories of Europe that could be written. It is the view of one pair of eyes, filtered by one brain, and translated by one pen.”³⁹ And later in the book: “Nor can one accept that the broad outlines of ‘general history’ have been fixed for all time. They too shift according to fashion: and those fixed fifty or one hundred years ago are ripe for revision.”⁴⁰

Second, these questions, especially the one about “being faithful to the past”, seem to derive from a framework according to which history is here to capture a pre-existing past reality as truthfully as possible. On this view, there is an actual past (past events and actions) and the role of historians is to write historical works that get it right. At least, for some, it looks like this is the main goal of doing history. But, as several authors challenge such a framework, is it not more viable to approach history in a different way? Louis Mink puts it aptly in his examination of historical narratives:

Historical actuality has, we may presume, its own complex structure (or lack of it); narrative has another, and one whose sources ... are of an entirely different order. It could be no more than a lucky accident if the structure of narrative ever successfully represented the structure of historical actuality; but even worse, no one could possibly know whether it did, since to do so would require *comparing* the two and thus would require knowing the

³⁸ See, for instance, Franklin R. Ankersmit, “Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History,” in *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), thesis 5.3.5.; Paul A. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2020); Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past* (London: Routledge, 2017); Mariana-Imaz Sheinbaum, *Historical Narratives: Constructable, Evaluable, Inevitable* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

³⁹ Davies, *Europe*, x.

⁴⁰ Davies, *Europe*, 4.

structure of historical actuality in itself independently of *any* representation of it. But this is impossible.⁴¹

What Mink (and later on several other authors such as Paul Roth and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen) questions is the idea of getting to know the past, to use the notorious phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. How could we even familiarise ourselves with past events as such without having them somehow appropriated, processed linguistically or conceptualised? Past events do not lie around for our impartial inspection. Rather, they are constructed by historical agents or historians and consequently they either sediment or not and they are either approved or not in further discussions. Neither the Prague Spring nor the French Revolution are out there in their given shape and significance, merely waiting for historians to recognise them. Historical events are designed by historians and argued for in their works. This is also clear from differing constructions. One historian dates and locates “the very same” event differently from another historian. Does the French Revolution start with pre-Bastille events and how far should historians go? Does it cover the Napoleonic era or not? Does the Prague Spring include moves in the Communist Party before the reforms took place? These are just some questions historians need to settle in their works; they are not settled in advance by having access to the alleged pre-existing ready-made events.

Furthermore, absent the access to reality on its own, how could we even make sense of the framework of comparison or correspondence between the past as such and the historical works supposedly representing it? The framework of correspondence and representation seems to be meaningful on the assumption there is, on the one hand, a past event, and, on the other hand, there is a historical work; and, most importantly, historians are able to review how faithfully the latter corresponds to or represents the former. As easy as it may look at first sight, in practice, it is far from clear how to do this. One may object: is the situation in history not similar to comparing a reproduction with an original object, for instance, a photo, a picture, a model or a description of the Eiffel Tower with the original iron tower itself? In the case of the Eiffel Tower and its replicas, reproductions or representations we seem to be able to compare them, to assess whether they offer good or bad representations. We may even be successful when it comes to selecting the best representation of the Eiffel Tower (although, even this conclusion may be controversial, especially if we think of various types of representation such as pictorial and textual). But this seems to be a situation in which, in theory at least, one may put all these various objects next to each other and compare them. This is not what is in fact going on in history. Historians do not and cannot face the objects they should allegedly compare, for instance, the Prague Spring as such, on the one hand, and its various depictions, on the other.⁴²

⁴¹ Louis O. Mink, “The Theory of Practice: Hexter’s Historiography,” in *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J. H. Hexter*, ed. Barbara C. Malament (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 19.

⁴² To prevent possible misunderstanding, this is not an argument for historians to observe actual happenings. I do not claim the way out of the problem is to focus on what is happening in the present. As Arthur Danto nicely shows in his *Ideal Chronicle* thought

Given the above considerations about the non-existence of ready-made events, historians, in fact, cannot compare the past as such and historical works. There is simply no given Prague Spring or French Revolution historians may impartially examine to assess how well Davies' or Simms' accounts correspond to them. The framework of correspondence and representation is, in the end, an implausible framework for the actual historical discipline.

NON-REPRESENTATIONALISM IN HISTORY

But what does this mean for our understanding of history? It means we should change our approach to history. Maybe a way out of this deadlock is to question the dualistic correspondence and representation framework. What if history is not about writing historical texts which should *represent* the past events? What if history should be approached from a different perspective? Let us for a moment forget about the alleged ambition of historical works to get the past reality right. What kind of account may replace it? What kind of non-correspondence or non-representationalist approach looks viable? A more promising view of history is to conceive of historical works as outcomes of specific non-representationalist *practices*.⁴³ Such an approach has a lot to do with a more pragmatically oriented mindset. If we look at historical works in this way, we are no more interested in constructing abstractions about checking the fit or match between texts and past realities. We are rather interested in other types of concrete steps historians have made in their work, in the broader contexts of constructing their outcomes, in the genealogies of historical works. Within this framework, the following questions seem to be more important: Who wrote the historical work? Is the author an advocate of a specific historical school? What training did she get? What sources were used? Were any of the relevant materials neglected? Does the work fit into a critical discussion on some topic? Does it dispute the interpretations of other historians? What agenda is being put forward in this historical work? What are the main theses, key arguments, or explanatory model employed in this work?

To embrace a non-representationalist understanding of history means to change the questions which are of interest. Historical works cease to be considered as primarily representations; they become the outcomes of concrete steps and agency. Historians are agents in their own right and that is why, by examining their

experiment, historians should not and cannot reduce their work to the perspective of a witness. See Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴³ One of the reviewers pointed out that representationalists may also claim history follows certain practices. Therefore, the key point of non-representationalist or non-correspondence approach is that history should be understood in terms of practices not relying on representation or correspondence. Of course, to specify which practices are these would require further elaboration.

agency, their decisions, their inclination, their training and their concrete steps, we learn a lot about what and why they wrote.⁴⁴

In his popular study on *What is History?*, Edward Hallett Carr remarks: “Study the historian before you begin to study the facts.”⁴⁵ Later, he adds: “Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment.”⁴⁶ Although non-representationalism should not be reduced to a “know your historian” *bon mot*, there is an important truth and a change in attitude in these remarks. Since we cannot judge the fit between the text and the past, we should attempt to understand historical works in a different way. We should explore the background, the context and the authors of historical works. Moreover, we should examine the more general historical and social setting of historical works, because each work is produced within a certain context. This is one way to reveal the concrete steps hidden behind historical works; this is a way to conceive of these works as the results of specific practices.

Let me use the two histories of Europe to illustrate these theoretical points. In this situation, when we look at the accounts presented by Davies and Simms as primarily representations of past happenings, we will need to evaluate how faithfully they represent them. But how to accomplish this task? It is far from clear to see with what should we compare the two texts or interpretations. Should we imagine some kind of complex which could be labelled “the history of Europe” or should we cut it into “individual events”? Neither option seems plausible. The reason is that although the past consists of many occurrences, there are neither clear-cut complexes such as “the history of Europe”, “the history of Asia” etc. nor smaller-scale events waiting for historians to inspect them to evaluate their interpretations. According to the view put forward above, these complex histories and events are actually designed by historians. They are proposed in their works and stabilised within historical discussions. Therefore, it does not make good sense to use them as yardsticks to evaluate the texts in which they are constructed. To

⁴⁴ I provide a more detailed examination of non-representationalism in Eugen Zelenák, “Non-representationalism in Philosophy of History: A Case Study,” in *Towards a Revival of Analytical Philosophy of History: Around Paul A. Roth’s Vision of Historical Sciences*, ed. Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 116–129 and Eugen Zelenák, “Representation,” in *The Routledge Companion to Historical Theory*, ed. Chiel van den Akker (London: Routledge, 2022), 299–315. I think philosophies of history of Paul Roth and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen provide interesting examples of non-representationalist accounts. See, for instance, their works Paul Andrew Roth, “Ways of Pastmaking,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15, 4 (2002): 125–143; Roth, *The Philosophical Structure*; Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, “Representationalism and Non-representationalism in Historiography,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 7, 3 (2013): 453–479; Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For a helpful exposition of the views of Roth see also two texts published in this journal: Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi, „Powrót do przyszłości Paula A. Rotha. Historia i nauka jako racjonalne działanie człowieka (ponownie),” *Historyka Studia Metodologiczne* 50 (2020): 461–485; Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi, „W stronę logicznej struktury narracji historycznych. Wywiad z Paulem A. Rothem,” *Historyka Studia Metodologiczne* 50 (2020): 487–504.

⁴⁵ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1987), 23.

⁴⁶ Carr, *What is History?*, 44.

repeat, this does not mean there is no past, it only means the past does not get to historians pre-packaged for their cognitive handling.

As soon as we free ourselves from the ambition to examine the correspondence between historical texts and supposedly given chunks of past reality, new avenues of interest are open. We may focus on the non-representationalist practical steps historians have made in their work, which means, to be more specific, to explore the sources they used, which theories influenced them (which approach they advocate or to which school they belong), which explanatory models they employed in their works etc. The discussion about histories of Europe illustrates this type of inquiry. On the one hand, Simms, as a scholar of international relations, has the agenda of reforming the EU on his mind. Since he is focusing on geopolitics in history, he approaches the history of Europe in a special way: he offers a mono-causal explanation of happenings and emphasises power struggle as the most important dimension in the history of Europe. Davies, a historian with a good knowledge of and sympathy for Poland and certain Eastern European countries, is trying to be fairer to the East and to limit pro-Russian sentiments in Western academia. This translates into his specific account of various events, into his rich narratives about topics and regions others quite often neglect. Finally, given his Heraclitean conviction that everything is subject to “change and decay”, he is far from giving his readers a stable pattern behind the turbulent happenings throughout the history of various regions of Europe.

Before I conclude, let me offer a brief and tentative characterisation of representationalism and non-representationalism drawing on the claims made above. Representationalism in history advocates the view that historical works should offer as faithful representations of the past reality as possible. The point of both individual statements and larger accounts is to correspond to what happened in the past. That is why we need to examine historical works within the framework of representation and correspondence to understand it better.⁴⁷ Non-representationalism rejects such a framework and argues that historical works should not be compared with the alleged model (the past reality). For this is not possible. Instead, to understand historical works, we should focus on the specific non-representationalist practices that lead to the production of historical accounts. These may be very different practices. Some advocates of this more pragmatically oriented approach may focus on the research phase or argumentative dimension of historical works, while others may concentrate on community-sanctioned rules and procedures etc.⁴⁸

To conclude, let me repeat my main point, made within this examination of two interesting historical works. (This case study of actual works dealing with the history of Europe will hopefully prove more relevant to historians than a purely philosophical account of the theoretical problems of representationalism.) In this paper, I try to show that it is more viable to see historical works as outcomes of specific non-

⁴⁷ Kuukkanen characterizes representationalism as follows: “representations and their production are fundamental for historiography” – Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 31.

⁴⁸ The issue of specific practices, their plurality, their selection and the details of how they could be used to clarify historical discipline would require a separate paper.

representationalist practices rather than faithful representations. For it seems to be more reasonable to focus on the concrete decisions and steps taken by historians and not on how they allegedly pick the correct account based on a comparison of works with past events. To put it differently, plurality in history could be used as an argument against representationalism and as support for non-representationalism.

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