

<b>Institution:</b> King's College London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Reframing Brexit Britain		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000–2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
David Edgerton	Hans Rausing Professor of the History of Science and Technology and Professor of Modern British History	From 2013 (special transfer case approved by REF to include research previous to KCL appointment)
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Professor David Edgerton's research has changed understandings of key issues of 20th-century British history among politicians, journalists and intellectuals. He championed the idea of British nationalism, rather than imperialism, as a key concept within public discussion around the causes of Brexit. Through radically rewriting the history of industrial strategy in Britain, he informed a cross-party shift towards taking policy for innovation and industry seriously. By challenging national myths of the Second World War, particularly the idea that the UK was weak and alone in 1940, Edgerton not only reframed the public understanding of the conflict, but also the parallels drawn from it, notably Brexit and COVID-19.

### 2. Underpinning research

Edgerton's series of ground-breaking books has presented a concerted challenge to hackneyed tropes and well-entrenched orthodoxies in the history of the UK during the 20th century, changing the terms of academic study as well as popular understanding of the period.

#### Taking British nationalism seriously

*The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, which to date has sold 18,000 copies, centres on a novel conceptualisation of a new British nation and nationalism after 1945 emerging out of the British empire/global economy and forged within a new national political economic framework. This contrasts with earlier approaches that see imperialism and nationalism as one and stress the continuity of imperialist delusions after 1945, leading to economic decline, racism and as explanatory causes to Brexit in the recent past.

*The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* also contains an empirical and theoretical critique of the dominant accounts of the nature of British capitalism and capitalists and relations to the British state. Far from an anti-industrial political culture, Edgerton stresses the close links, not least in politics, between state and capital, arguing that the high point of British industrial production was in the 1950s and 1960s and that there has since been a determined move away from promoting a national capitalism.

#### Writing in Britain's developmental state

*Warfare State* and *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* show that after the Second World War UK governments of both political parties maintained a strong military and industrial policy designed to strengthen the new post-imperial nation, which directly complemented post-war welfarist and social policies. His approach contrasts sharply with previous orthodoxies insisting on the centrality of the welfare state only and which portrayed industrial and innovation policy as weak and at best misdirected. Edgerton, in other words, allows us to see that the UK had a developmental state in the post-war decades, in which politicians and bureaucrats sort to foster national industries and promote national inventions.

**Neither weak, nor 'alone'**

*Warfare State* and *Britain's War Machine* (which has sold more than 17,000 copies), in contrast to the view that British arms were weak in the inter-war years and thus in 1939–40, show that for most of the time, the RAF and Royal Navy were in fact second to none and were supported by probably the largest military-industrial-scientific complex in the world.

*Britain's War Machine* shows that during the Second World War the UK and the British empire relied on capital intensive forces, much more so than Germany. Furthermore, the nation was not alone, nor believed to be alone (as modern historiography suggests), but was part of an empire, always had allies and also depended on massive overseas supply. All this represents a major revision of older and recent works on the war. The book was widely reviewed in the national press (and was lead review in *The Observer*), was shortlisted for the Hessel-Tiltman History Prize and was a *Guardian* Book of the Year.

As the academic reviews noted, all these works rely on extensive primary research to make radically new arguments about 20th-century British history, including the public-facing works.

**3. References to the research**

1. Edgerton, D. (2005). *Warfare State: Britain 1920–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Japanese translation (2017).
2. Edgerton, D. (2011). *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin; New York: Oxford University Press.
3. Edgerton, D. (2018). *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin.

**4. Details of the impact**

Following the 2016 Brexit referendum, there was a dramatic transformation in the public life of the UK. For some, it involved much heart-searching about the true nature of Britain and British history, while for others it was a moment to celebrate and replay the Second World War. For many politicians it was a time to rethink British policy, not least industrial and innovation policy. In these contexts, reshaping understandings of history, understood to be of central political relevance, had a material impact. Edgerton's work made people think in new ways. This impact was achieved through writing books for the general public [2,3] and drawing directly on the books, multiple articles for the press, speaking at government and other events, and many appearances on TV and radio [D]. His books became necessary reading for many in public life on both the left and the right. The *New Statesman* said of *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* that: "Every so often a book comes out that the entire political class needs to read". *The Rise and Fall* was noted as a feature of the literary year 2018 by *Whitaker's Almanac* and was a book of the year in *Prospect*, *History Today* and the *New Statesman* [A]. It was reviewed in nearly all the national press and most of the major weeklies, often as a lead review.

The impact revolved around three themes: (i) putting the idea of British nationalism, rather than imperialism, and the decay of a British national capitalism into the discussion on Brexit; (ii) creating a new account of national policy for innovation and industry, which helped to reinvigorate the contemporary desire for a coherent industrial strategy; and (iii) undermining key myths of the Second World War that Britain was alone and weak in 1940 and, in turn, rethinking what many consider to be its contemporary analogues, Brexit and COVID-19.

**Putting nationalism and the national economy into the Brexit debate**

Edgerton transformed the public debate on Brexit by framing its causes in terms of British nationalism and the demise of the national economy. The standard view, among many historians and among the largely Remain-backing commentariat, was that the Brexit vote was, like the failure to enter the EEC in the 1950s, a product of an underlying British imperialism. This was one of the many ways British history was linked to Brexit. *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* was a powerful force in changing minds and in introducing new elements into the debate. The intervention was two-fold. First, the importance of post-war nationalism, rather than imperialism, in shaping the politics of Brexit: that Brexit was a longing for a national politics and a national economy that had been central to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. The second was his argument that the old British national capitalism had given way to a strong non-British capitalism in the UK, which necessarily had very different connections to the Conservative Party. This helped explain

## Impact case study (REF3)

the mystery of why the Conservative government was pursuing a Brexit policy that business in Britain did not support and why business was so acquiescent.

It was clear from commentary on the book and related work that Edgerton had taken a distinctive and politically significant view on Brexit that gave him a pathway to impact. Opinion formers took note of *The Rise and Fall* and Edgerton was invited to contribute op-ed pieces of major reach. He was commissioned to write five *Guardian* articles, while the *New Statesman* commissioned a cover story on the transformation of British capitalism and a long read on the historical politics of British trade. The distinctiveness and significance of the arguments led him to be invited onto Radio 4's *Today* programme (reaching around 5 million listeners) to discuss his book on the first anniversary of the Brexit vote. He was often paired with the most important pro-Brexit historians: for example, with Robert Tombs on the BBC World Service and on *Newsnight*, and with the Thatcher biographer and former editor of the *Telegraph* and *Spectator* Charles Moore on a *Channel Four News* podcast. In a truncated online clip, this had 364,000 views and 4,000 retweets on Twitter, with thousands of reactions, comments and shares on Facebook, and led to stories on it in the *New European* on the *Independent* website [B,D].

Edgerton's argument that one needed to take account of a deep but unrecognised non-imperial British nationalism in Brexit became part of a national discussion. As one comment on Twitter put it: "*Are you sure that Brexiters are longing for the Empire, rather than the pre-Thatcher British nation which David Edgerton's book is about?*" [D]. The *New Statesman* recognised how *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*: "*challenges many of the fundamental preconceptions of Brexiteers and Remainers alike*". In the *Economist*, a dedicated column hailed its call to rethink what "*we thought we knew about British national character*" [A]. For other people, it helped make sense of the politics of Brexit: a socialist activist (with 120,000 followers on Twitter) noted: "*I'm struck how coalitions, shifting party loyalties, constitutional skirmishes and multiple nationalisms are the historical norm for British politics – not some terrifying modern malfunction*" [D].

The idea of an imperial origin of Brexit, that the empire was striking back, was also strong in the policy world in Brussels and Edgerton's book had a role in changing that. Dr Eoin Drea, Senior Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels (the official think tank of the European Peoples' Party (Christian Democrats)), organised a panel with Edgerton in June 2019 attended by around 100 EU officials and others concerned with EU policy to discuss the empire strikes back thesis and his critique. Dr Drea noted in his opening remarks: "*The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: [is] the inspiration for this event*" [F].

Edgerton's work on the specific nature of British capitalism also altered the terms of the Brexit debate. One article in *The Guardian* on this theme garnered a quite exceptional 4,430 comments, 4,171 social media posts and at least 500 discrete tweets. The noted French intellectual Bruno Latour (26,000 followers) tweeted in response: "*If you despair of understanding Brexit, David Edgerton's piece is most remarkable in the link between forms of capitalism, influence on party politics, and the problem of who defends national interests*" [D]. More generally, the claims about Brexit being driven by a Conservative Party no longer tied to a national capitalism were seized on by foreign journalists who found Brexit otherwise inexplicable. The argument was picked up very strongly by business and economic journalists, both in Britain and abroad, who wished to explain to their business readers the strange politics of Brexit [A].

### **The policy implications of Britain's developmental state**

The standard view of post-war industrial and innovation policy was that it was weakly developed and was a failure. In revising the standard account of post-war policy [1,3], Edgerton argued that the British record in industrial policy after 1945 was one of serious policy activism and ambition, and one in which the state spent a great deal on R&D and achieving some success. This argument gave courage to advocates of fresh policy initiatives across the political spectrum, from Policy Exchange on the right and the Institute of Public Policy Research on the left, and in the government and in the opposition. The issue gained new salience after the Brexit referendum as some politicians in the Conservative Party sought to develop a more national policy for innovation and industry under Theresa May, and also in the post-Brexit Labour party.

Edgerton's work on the history of industrial and innovation policy changed the view of policymakers and politicians. Tony Curzon Price, Economic Advisor to Greg Clark, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy between 2016 and 2019, cited Edgerton's work extensively in briefs for his minister on industrial strategy, innovation policy, consumer protection and regulation for innovation; decisions on nuclear power, energy policy and

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decarbonisation; and increase in state R&D. Curzon Price noted that “*David Edgerton’s Rise and Fall of the British Nation had a material impact in all of these policy areas*” because it changed minds about the success and nature of industrial strategy of the past. The impact of Edgerton’s ideas at senior levels in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) may also be judged from the fact that he was invited to address more than 100 civil servants at BEIS [G].

In the Labour party too, there was new interest in national economics and industrial policy, which was sharpened and made more confident as a result of Edgerton’s research. The Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP, the former chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Select Committee, said: “*David’s history provides an important historical guide in helping us think about how in future we can develop a Labour political economy*” [E]. She also cited his arguments in a contribution to a Fabian Society book, *Beyond Brexit: The Left’s Agenda for the UK and EU* (edited by Olivia Bailey, with a foreword by Sir Keir Starmer, 2018). Edgerton has also become a regular participant in Labour Party policy seminars run by Rachel Reeves and attended by other members of the Shadow Cabinet.

### Never ‘alone’ and always strong

The standard popular argument in academic histories, on television and in popular histories of the Second World War was that in 1940 the UK was not only weak militarily and industrially, but also found itself alone and turned inward to find strength. This argument has been central in the political uses of histories of the war not least in the context of Brexit and COVID-19. Edgerton’s argument that it was neither weak nor alone in *Britain’s War Machine*, that it was relatively strong and had many allies, as well as being *part* of the British empire and dependent on the rest of the world, challenged the core of the standard story. He contributed to the *New Statesman* on the meaning of VE Day, which provoked a Twitter storm (1,400 retweets, 101 quoted tweets and 7,400 likes) and generated an article in the *Daily Express* [D].

The impact of these arguments was evidenced in a slew of books and programmes of very wide reach that took up his arguments explicitly, and in others where the older arguments were quietly dropped. For example, James Holland’s bestselling *War in the West* takes up Edgerton’s non-declinst position. As he put it on Twitter (to his 37,000 followers), Edgerton “*had a huge impact on my own studies into #WWII & done much to kick the declinist view into touch*” [D]. A BBC Radio 4 series on the economic history of 1940 gave pride of place to Edgerton’s arguments in its discussion of the UK. Similarly, his fresh account of the British case represented the UK in a VoxEU collection on the economics of the war for economists (and was cited in the *Sunday Times*).

Edgerton was also invited to present the British story from his point of view in many documentaries, including an outstanding ABC Australia series on the Second World War and the *War Factory* series (2019). The extent of the transformation can be gauged from an episode of the very popular Second World War podcast *We Have Ways of Making You Talk* (Al Murray and James Holland), which reflected on the ways Edgerton has changed understanding of the war [C]. As someone put it on Twitter, “*Britain’s War Machine ... will change your view of the war and Britain’s place in it forever*” [D].

His specific arguments about the war – that the nation was well-prepared in advance and that the war involved extensive connections to the rest of the world – were also taken up as a distinct challenge to the view that there were good analogies between the war and COVID-19 and which led to more responsible thinking about policy during the pandemic. His picture of the Second World War was also important in rejecting analogies between the war and the COVID-19 crisis. One contribution was noted by John Naughton in the *Observer* as “*a bracing post by historian David Edgerton on his terrific blog*”. His view that the wartime analogies were false and dangerous helped reduce the prevalence of the argument and was widely adopted. A *Guardian* article on this was shared on social media 1,700 times. He was invited to contribute on this theme to the *New Statesman* and the *New European* and Evan Davis’s BBC Radio 4 *Bottom Line* business programme (28 May 2020) to elucidate comparisons between the Second World War and COVID-19, as well as for the VoxTalk podcast for economists [A,B]. He was also quoted in a *Spears Magazine* cover story, a *Financial Times* long read and in *Fortune* and *Forbes* to support the argument that the wartime analogy was highly misleading [A]. The cumulative impact of these interventions among politicians, journalists and public intellectuals has been a definitive refashioning of key issues of 20th-century British history and the implications of such frameworks for understanding Brexit Britain.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

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- A. Report on mentions of David Edgerton's research in the press.
- B. Report on mentions of David Edgerton's research in other media.
- C. Report on David Edgerton's articles in the media.
- D. Report on David Edgerton's social media impact.
- E. Testimonial from Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP.
- F. Testimonial from Dr Eoin Drea, Senior Research Officer, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.
- G. Testimonial from Tony Curzon Price, Economic Adviser to Greg Clarke, the former Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.