

Conference Report

18th International Conference in Irish-German Studies

Unions, Break-ups and Special Relationships –
Aspects of the Irish-German-UK Relationships

University of Limerick, 4-5 November 2021

This conference organised by Centre for Irish-German Studies (CIGS) in coordination with Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, Ulster University, the Centre for European Studies, UL and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) successfully took place at the University of Limerick. It focused on three aspects: first, a major feature was a discussion of the initial impact and ongoing repercussions of Brexit for British-German Relations and British Studies in Germany/German Studies in the UK as well as Irish-German relations and German Studies in Ireland and Irish Studies in Germany. Secondly, we reflected on German unification from a cultural and political perspective. Focusing on reunification itself, this part asked what lessons can be learned from the German experience and whether - keeping in mind the vastly different situation in Ireland North and South, there are aspects of the German experience that could of interest in the ‘Shared Ireland, Shared Island’ discussions. And thirdly and last but by no means least the engagement with Europe and the European Union in Ireland and Northern Ireland after Brexit was a focal point. This part analysed the situation north and south of the Irish border vis-a-vis the EU and the European context of economic, legal, policy and cultural questions. This report covers all parts of the conference in chronological order.

Welcome Address:

The welcome address included acknowledgements from Daniel Butler (Mayor of Limerick); Prof. Kerstin Mey (UL President); H.E. Cord Meier-Klodt (German Ambassador to Ireland), Mr Matthias Barner (Director KAS UK & Ireland); and Prof. Gisela Holfter (Director CIGS, UL), all of whom emphasised the importance of Irish-German relations in today’s post Brexit climate. The Mayor of Limerick, Daniel Butler, humorously remarked, “*The Germans are taking over,*” in reference not only to Germany’s recent presidential visit to the University of Limerick, but also to the German connections in his own family. University of Limerick’s president, Kerstin Mey, along with H.E. Cord Meier-Klodt both emphasised the bonds between UL and Germany as well as Ireland and the EU and how these ties are strengthening thanks to strategic partnership between Ireland and Germany in particular. In reference to Brexit, the German Ambassador quipped how no one likes break ups and that, “*Unions, in a political sense, we like them very much.*” Prof. Gisela Holfter provided some background to the genesis of the conference which had developed from her discussions with Prof. Paul Carmichael (Ulster University) when they were both visiting fellows at the Centre for British Studies in Berlin. The final programme was then put together in collaboration with Prof. Joachim Fischer (Deputy Director CIGS and Director of the Centre for European Studies in UL) and Prof. Holfter stressed the good cooperation with Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung in the preparation of the conference.

Session 1:

At Session 1 speakers were invited to focus on British-German Relations and British Studies in Germany/German Studies in the UK, as well as Irish-German relations and German Studies in Ireland and vice versa. The session was chaired by Robert Henneberg, Cultural Attaché at the German Embassy in Dublin.

Prof. Katharina Rennhak (Wuppertal) described the representation of Irish Studies in Germany. She noted a decline in Irish Studies in Germany due to the rise in popularity of post-colonial studies. She then saluted Brexit for intensifying relations between Ireland and Germany, as it could be used as a tool to promote Irish Studies in Germany. As president of the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS) she is keenly interested in the promotion of Irish Studies throughout Europe. Her point, “*There are small EU countries and there are EU countries which haven’t realized that they are small,*” illustrates that Ireland, despite its size, has a lot to offer in the EU if other countries are willing to acknowledge and support that.

Prof. Nicola McLelland (Nottingham) divulged that German Studies are under-represented in the UK, markedly in light of Brexit. With the use of demonstrative graphs, she showed how fewer UK students sit secondary level German examinations than Irish students, a shocking comparison given the difference in population size. She expressed how Brexit has negatively impacted UK relations with the rest of Europe, with particular regard to modern language teaching at third level and leading to the closure of German Studies in several universities around the UK.

Prof. Pól O Dochartaigh (NUI Galway), who recognised himself as “*the last professor of German in the North (of Ireland),*” gave insight into the dismal state of German Studies in Northern Ireland. His historical account and timeline encapsulated the downturn of German Studies in Northern Irish universities, neither of which offers German anymore. His summation of the current situation in the North is bleak but remains hopeful that things will improve in some ways.

Dr Marieke Krajenbrink (UL) focused on the representation of German Studies in the Republic of Ireland. She noted a relatively meager uptake of German by secondary level students, as opposed to Romance languages. She argued, however, that German is well represented in third level institutions in the Republic, with stable or growing student numbers. Dr Krajenbrink noted the advantages of Brexit for Ireland, “*We find ourselves in a fortunate situation in comparison to the UK,*” in recognition of Ireland being the only country in the Eurozone which speaks English as a first language, certainly an attraction for foreign students.

Session 2

The speakers of session 2 of the 18th International Conference in Irish-German Studies were introduced by chair Prof. Joachim Fischer and their main focus was bilateral relations of the UK and Ireland, Irish-German Studies at UL in Ireland, and German-British Relations.

Dr. Paul Gillespie from the British-Irish Studies Institute at UCD focused on the political dimensions between the United Kingdom and Ireland, looking at power, scale and wealth that molds the relationship, especially in times of Brexit which amounted to a huge “political shock” for everyone involved.

The term Irish-German Studies was then further defined by the second speaker Prof. Gisela Holfter who heads the Centre for Irish-German Studies in UL. It is an interdisciplinary field of studies that evolves around all aspects of Irish-German relations; most importantly in history, language, the arts, society, geography and cultural practice, the literal connection, mainly established by Heinrich Böll’s “*Irishesches Tagebuch*” which still remains one of the best known. The celebration of 90 years of diplomatic relations in 2019 reflects the strong bond

between the two countries and given the recent state visit of the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in October 2021 Irish-German relations will hopefully continue to prosper.

Dr. Marius Guderjan from the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt University Berlin presented German-British political, economic, and cultural relations and expanded on the worrying effects Brexit is having on such relationships such as the UK going from the 5th most important trade partner to Germany in 2017 to the 8th in 2021 or the need to find new exchange programmes that replace ERASMUS or the DAAD. Despite these consequences, Germany is intent upon maintaining a cordial relationship with the UK moving forward from Brexit (this can be seen via the joint agreement on defense and foreign policy that both parties signed during Angela Merkel's state visit to the UK in 2021).

Session 3

On Friday morning, the second day of the 18th International Conference in Irish-German Studies set off with a session on German unification from a political and cultural perspective. Dr. Patricia Conlan chaired the session, with Prof. Constantin Goschler (*Ruhr Universität Bochum*) and Prof. Jürgen Pelzer (*Occidental College Los Angeles*) presenting contributions on the political semantics of the memory and discourse surrounding German unification, and a literary history of the GDR and the role of East German literature in perpetuating unification respectively.

Prof. Constantin Goschler opened his critical reflections stressing the social division and the structural economical differences between the Federal Republic of Germany (*BRD*) and the German Democratic Republic (*DDR*). The speaker engaged with terms that have been defining the unification process in the past and actual political discourse such as “unity” (*Einheit*) and “reunification” (*Wiedervereinigung*) and in particular the “take-over” (*Übernahme*) or even “*Anschluss*”, as West Germany politics toward the former *DDR* was called by some critics.

Prof. Jürgen Pelzer's reflections on the *Wende* and the reunification of Germany provided an overview of the popular activism in the “peaceful revolution” of 1989/1990, focusing in particular on political poetry in West and East Germany. His contribution stressed the fact that alongside the enthusiastic participation of many artists and poets, which saw the reunification as an act of freedom, reunification was perceived as a loss of individual and collective identity among several poets of East Germany, as Volker Braun exemplified in his poem “*das Eigentum*” (the property): *Da bin ich noch: mein Land geht in den Westen / I'm still here, though my country's gone West.*

Session 4: Shared Ireland, Shared Island? – Reflecting on challenges and opportunities of the Irish situation

The second half of Part II on Friday morning, chaired by Prof. Shane Kilcommins (Dean of AHSS, UL), delved more deeply into the topic of partition and division of countries, focusing on the challenges and opportunities of a potentially united Ireland. Prof. Oran Doyle of Trinity College Dublin provided insight into the constitutional issues involved in a unification of Ireland and Northern Ireland. He discussed the possibility of a referendum if a majority of the population favours unification of the countries, but at the same time pointed out the difficulty of assessing such a situation. He also stressed the importance of a detailed plan for

the outcome of a referendum. Issues of identity (national flag, honorary titles, or language issues) must be outlined so that people can make an informed decision.

Prof. James McAuley of the University of Huddersfield also commented on the issue of identity. He discussed the future of Northern Ireland, focusing on the identity of the Irish, Northern Irish and British identifying populations in the country. Using various polls and surveys, he painted a picture of a deeply divided society with differences in age groups, gender, and class affiliation. In the discussion that followed, the conference participants discussed the various surveys and took a closer look at the issues of identity that a united Ireland might entail.

Session 5: Analysing the situation north and south of the Irish border vis-a-vis the EU and the European context of economic, legal, policy and cultural questions.

The final session of the 18th International Conference on Irish-German Studies looked at the post-Brexit situation on the island of Ireland in the European context. Prof. John Coakley of Queen's University Belfast began with the demographic, attitudinal and geopolitical challenges of Brexit. In Northern Ireland in particular, leaving the European Union has led to shifts in public opinion about the union and identity. "The cost of Brexit," Prof. Coakley said, "was Northern Ireland."

Prof. Mary Murphy of University College Cork emphasised the difficulty of a post-Brexit transition period for Northern Ireland. Discussions about triggering Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol pose a serious threat to businesses. Beyond the economic challenges, Prof. Murphy pointed to the lack of plans for cross-cultural and international development. Northern Ireland's ambitions to build fruitful relationships with other European countries are underdeveloped. This is particularly unfortunate, as it would give Northern Ireland the opportunity to reframe the Brexit story and tell its own.

On the topic of cultural exchange, Prof. Joachim Fischer of the University of Limerick provided an overview of the inadequacy of education in the European Union and the benefits of multilingualism. He noted a widespread ignorance among young people about the work of the EU, political structures, and distribution of competences. This is not just an unfortunate trend in the Republic of Ireland: In Northern Ireland, foreign language learning is declining, and the standard of education about the European Union is even lower than south of the border. For Prof. Fischer, the key to changing this situation is political and cultural education on European issues and language learning. "Developing a love of language or learning it is European," he said.

The last part of the conference was an animated and fascinating roundtable discussion with chaired by Prof. Paul Carmichael (Ulster University) and featuring Prof. Edward Moxon-Browne (Emeritus Professor European Studies, UL), Tony Connelly (RTE, Brussels), Prof John O'Brennan (Maynooth University), Prof Oran Doyle (Trinity College Dublin) and Prof. Katy Hayward (QUB). Questions raised throughout the different sessions were taken up again while recent developments in the context of the Northern Irish Protocol, voting behaviour and societal changes were explored and contextualised, showing clearly the intricacies and shifting ground in the complex Irish – German – British relationships.

Organiser Prof. Gisela Holfter thanked all contributors, the audience, collaborating institutions and colleagues, specifically Katie O'Connor of KAS, the colleagues at CIGS,

MLAL and the Glucksman Library and officially closed the conference. However, several interested participants availed of the opportunity of a guided tour and presentation of the Gottschalk book collection in Irish-German Studies housed in the Special Collections at the UL Glucksman Library by Ken Bergin, the Head of Special Collections, before leaving.

Summary

Having this face-to-face conference after 1.5 years of only virtual events was special and new links, not least between academics from the North and South in Ireland, were forged that can be built upon in a follow-up conference next year in November with the University of Ulster in Belfast. Given the size restrictions in the room due to health guidelines a far smaller number of students than anticipated could be invited (though as this was organised on a rotating basis quite a few MA students and undergraduate students could avail of the opportunity to attend at least one session of the conference). The restrictions also affected the participation of several speakers, however, all four affected speakers could be facilitated to contribute virtually, even the participant at the Round Table discussion, and this hybrid presentation form worked remarkably well, however the organisational challenge for all in UL was considerable. This was counterbalanced by the excellent support of the KAS with all flight and accommodation issues. As the first cooperation between the Centre for Irish-German Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung it was an excellent beginning which is likely to be followed with further joint activities in the future.

Overall the feedback from participants, both speakers and from the audience, was extremely positive – to give some examples from subsequent emails “the quality of papers was exceptional”; “höchst lehrreich”; “I hugely enjoyed participating and learnt a lot from the other papers”; “It was a real pleasure to be part of such an interesting and enjoyable set of discussions”; “thank you for this wonderful event. It had a fascinating academic programme, a most hospitable and enjoyable social programme, and a diverse and active range of attendees”; “Brilliantly organised and a plethora of academic talent. The way the 'remote' speakers fitted seamlessly into the programme was very impressive”.

Contributors: Students of GE6021 and G. Holfter