




BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Broad and Richard T. Griffiths. *Britain, the Division of Western Europe and the Creation of EFTA, 1955–1963*

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November 1958 marked the end of the road for a British proposal for a Free Trade Area (FTA) comprised of the seventeen members of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). Although it was the soon-to-be French president, Charles de Gaulle, who ultimately stood behind the decision, the messenger was France's information minister, Jacques Soustelle. In a press conference he claimed that the absence of a common external tariff and the "lack of harmonization measures in the economic and social field" meant that it was not possible to create an FTA along the lines proposed by the British (130). The collapse of these negotiations meant that a smaller grouping of seven countries, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, went on to form an entirely new group, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). It is the creation and early months of operation of this organization, as well as the years that preceded the original FTA proposal that stand at the center of Broad and Griffiths's volume.

It is tempting, as some interpretations have done, to see EFTA as the alternative on which those countries that had supported the FTA proposals fell back after de Gaulle's rebuff in 1958. Following that logic, and with the knowledge that two founding members, Denmark and the United Kingdom, would attempt to leave the organization and join their main European rivals, the Six that formed the European Economic Community (EEC), in 1961, it is understandable, then, that EFTA has been seen as a temporary interlude in the history of European integration. But, as the authors explain in the introduction, the period from 1955, when the United Kingdom withdrew from talks with the Six, to 1963, when the United Kingdom and Denmark failed to gain EEC entry, was in fact a "critical phase in the development in Western European integration" (1). As the authors show across the volume's seven chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion), the events of the period demonstrate how one grouping of European states, the Seven, dealt with the emergence of a powerful economic rival and how diplomacy between states, interactions within international institutions, and the technical details of international trade negotiations all contributed to the economic shape of the continent.

In addition to this new perspective on 1955–63, Broad and Griffiths offer a fresh interpretation of specific events within this period, three examples of which stood out for this author. The first is the British government's decision in 1955 to reject participation in the negotiations among the Six for a customs union and common market. Broad and Griffiths call this the real "missed chance" in the history of the United Kingdom and European integration, a reference to the argument that the decision taken by Clement Attlee's government

not to participate in the talks that led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community was the moment when the United Kingdom missed the European bus: “Had the government offered to join an FTA with the Six, this would probably have been seen as a real commitment.” The authors acknowledge the reasons why this did not happen, including the fact such a proposal would have caused divisions within the Conservative Party, which still had a deep attachment to a specific idea of the United Kingdom’s world role, one that excluded closer European ties (49–50). In this way they are careful to avoid the tendency of the missed opportunities school of thought to argue, with the benefit of hindsight, about what should have been.

The second is de Gaulle’s rejection of the FTA proposals, discussed in chapter 4. Most scholars have tended to see this outcome as inevitable from the point at which he became prime minister in June 1958. Instead, Broad and Griffiths show that de Gaulle knew little about the proposals upon entering office and, at an early stage, was prepared to make some concessions in order to secure the FTA. This included dropping a previous commitment to *décalage*, a policy that meant the FTA’s tariff cuts would be three years behind the Treaty of Rome, thus making the FTA a secondary institution (115). The decision to turn against the FTA therefore has to be understood in the context of divisions in the French cabinet, West German reluctance to risk Franco-German unity in the context of the nascent EEC, and American support for the Six (132–3).

The final example is the negotiation of the London Agreement, which laid out a common EFTA position in the context of the Danish and British applications for EEC membership, made in 1961. Previous analyses have seen the agreement either as a “high point of EFTA solidarity” or as a promise that restricted the UK’s ability to negotiate with the Six. Instead, Broad and Griffiths argue that there was much more fragmentation among the Seven than has previously been acknowledged, with many members feeling “deeply uneasy” with the arrangements that had been spelled out. Furthermore, they point out that the final position in the agreement actually represents a rolling back of a much more restrictive set of proposals, which might have forced the United Kingdom to operate with EFTA as a group during talks with the Six (283–4).

Between 1955 and 1963 the economic and political environment of Western Europe underwent a rapid transformation. These events were challenging for the United Kingdom, which found two different formulations of its response to this changing environment rejected at the hands of the French. But, as Broad and Griffiths point out, these events were difficult for all involved: Europe, the United States, interest groups, and individuals who had chosen to take up positions in new European and international institutions. This conclusion would likely be impossible to draw without the impressive methodological approach the authors take, drawing on archives from ten different countries as well as three international institutions. Overall Broad and Griffiths have written a detailed history of the formation and early days of EFTA and clearly make the case that 1955–1963 was a decisive period in the history of European integration, one which is worthy of closer examination.