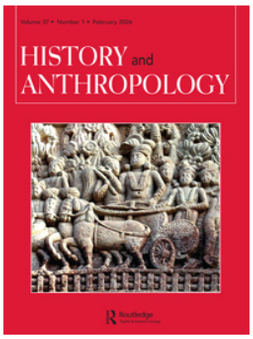

History and Anthropology

ISSN: 0275-7206 (Print) 1477-2612 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ghan20

# *Chronos* and *Kairos* in colonial Gibraltar: Remembering and forgetting on the British territory

Andrew Canessa

**To cite this article:** Andrew Canessa (22 Apr 2026): *Chronos* and *Kairos* in colonial Gibraltar: Remembering and forgetting on the British territory, History and Anthropology, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2026.2644208

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2026.2644208



Published online: 22 Apr 2026.

HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2026.2644208

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# *Chronos* and *Kairos* in colonial Gibraltar: Remembering and forgetting on the British territory*

Andrew Canessa

Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom

**ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar on the eve of the occasion when its long-standing border with Spain is about to disappear as a result of Brexit negotiations. Based on over 400 oral histories and ethnographic research, it explores how Gibraltarians developed a very British identity over the course of the 20th century and how different generations collaborate to articulate a coherent view of the past, the present, and, to some degree, the future. It develops Ingold's (2023) critique of 'generation now' to argue that there is – at least on some issues – a very large degree of consensus and communication across age groups: very little is transmitted across generations in terms of historical memory that disrupts the discourse of Gibraltarian Britishness and Spanish alterity. In contrast, all generations project an understanding of contemporary reality onto the past, even if it contradicts lived experience. It concludes that we need to think of new ways to understand how communities create identities 'across generations' and pay more heed to what is forgotten and not communicated as well as what is.

**KEYWORDS**

Gibraltar; generations; borders; identity; memory

## Introduction

'We see the world through British eyes' Gibraltar's chief minister stated in a BBC interview on March 8, 2018 (BBC 4 *Today*). Here, as in other pronouncements he has made, he signalled the thoroughly British character of Gibraltar and its inhabitants. 'We are more British than the British', Gibraltarians tell journalists and visitors alike. A successful three-season reality television programme entitled *Britain in the Sun* that was broadcast by the UK's *Channel 5* rarely even hinted that anyone could be anything other than thoroughly and resolutely British.

On the ground, Gibraltar boasts all the obvious signs of Britishness with red telephone boxes and bobbies on the beat and one comes across far more images of His Majesty the King (and hitherto his mother) in public buildings than anywhere in the UK. Gibraltarians

**CONTACT** Andrew Canessa canessa@essex.ac.uk
*Acknowledgements.

held to the custom of afternoon tea long after it was no longer common in the UK (almost to century's end). But then again, there are few red telephone boxes left in the UK; afternoon tea has largely disappeared, and the traditional custodian helmet is certainly far from ubiquitous. But in Gibraltar, there is an attachment to visible symbols that are less significant or in disuse in the UK. Although this is in itself unremarkable – after all, migrant communities often hold onto images of the 'home country' for decades or centuries after the act of migration, it is of particular significance here because this particular Britishness is (re)created not by a people who migrated from the UK but rather by and large from Italy, Malta, Spain, and Morocco.

Despite this history, Gibraltar's Britishness appears to be incontestable, and it is, moreover, a place where one can go to imagine a Britain of yesteryear. Gibraltar receives a steady stream of UK parliamentarians (often invited by the Gibraltar government) and others who can warm themselves on the ever-fainter glow of the embers of Empire. Gibraltar is a simulacrum of Britishness – one person commented to me that Gibraltar was like a Britishness theme park, or as Simon Jenkins (2013) in *The Guardian* commented, 'a Churchillian theme park of red pillar boxes, fish and chips and warm beer'.

Suggestions that they live in a theme park are deeply insulting to Gibraltarians who generally experience their home as a lived, if highly contested, reality where their sense of Britishness is deeply held. Rather than 'Britishness' as some essence or ideal emanating from the metropole, it is something that is constantly evolving and, as Stuart Ward's magisterial (2023) work has shown, has been produced, reproduced, and exported as much from the colonies as it was from the United Kingdom. That is to say, Britishness was made as much in Kenya as in Kensington and is certainly made and re-made in Gibraltar.

In 1983, Gibraltarians were granted UK citizenship under the Immigration Act of 1983 along with the Falkland Islanders, whose population had almost entirely settled from the UK. However, UK citizenship was not extended to other non-white British subjects (e.g. Hong Kong) in what remained of Britain's colonies. It often assumed in the UK that Gibraltar's population is largely descended from settlers from the UK, but in fact, although the UK has long maintained a garrison, naval base and (since WWII) an air force base, few UK-born people have ever settled in Gibraltar.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, Gibraltarians were overwhelmingly Spanish speaking, watched Spanish films, listened to Spanish music, and intermarried with Spanish people. The creation of Gibraltarians as British is relatively new: it is hard to find any reference from the nineteenth century that describes them as British, rather than, for example, they are described as 'Gibraltarian Spaniards' (Sanchez 2006) who colonial officials frequently complained spoke Spanish rather than English. Right up to WWII in colonial documents, censuses, and police records, people in Gibraltar were defined as 'Native', 'Alien' or 'British'.[1] In one police report of 1919, a boy who threw a stone at a police officer and was never caught was described as 'Spanish', as the officer was unable to determine whether he was Native or Alien. These 'Natives' (and some of the 'Aliens') were the parents and (great)grandparents of today's British Gibraltarians.

Governor Sir Archibald Hunter, addressing the Chamber of Commerce in 1913, insisted that:

> They all ought to speak English … No man should draw pay in a Government employment in Gibraltar who cannot speak intelligible English … .[2]

Yet, it was not until 1969 (when the border with Spain was shut) that the Royal Naval Dockyard ceased writing formal correspondence to its workers in Spanish. This was the same decade that the Dockyard decided it no longer needed separate toilets for English, Gibraltarians, and Spanish workers.

This article argues that by the middle of the twentieth century most Gibraltarians still had much more cultural affinity with their cousins (often literally) across the border than with the UK, even if, what we might call 'a generation later', this was no longer the case.[3] The key event underlying this shift was the 1969 closing of the border with Spain by the fascist government of General Franco, who sought to pressure Gibraltarians to join Spain. The move had the opposite effect: Gibraltarians became more oriented towards UK culture and increasingly anglophone. The strong affinity with Spain that predated the border closure was both denied and forgotten even by those who, as I will show, lived it.

## Generation and crisis

This article explores the process of this cultural change and ethnogenesis, and the role of memory and forgetting play in enabling it across generations. It is critical to be aware of the myriad problems in seeing the concept of 'generation' in a simplistic way, as Tim Ingold (2023) warns. Frequently, people talk of the 'Postwar generation' as if in 1945 a new kind of people emerged, but, of course, the 'Prewar' generation was very much still around during the postwar period. It is an illusion of the 'Generation Now' idea (*c.f.* Ingold 2023) that generations are discrete.

I focus here on how memory and history are actively shaped across generations and, in turn, shape or collapse those 'intergenerational relations' in surprising ways. Ingold (2023, 41) writes that ' … memory figures as an archive. Older memories lie beneath and can be accessed only by stripping away the ones that time has deposited above, extracting whatever we find there, and appropriating them as an object of heritage'. Although you can learn about the past by interviewing an 'older generation' and thus access that archive (Thompson 2000 [1983]), it is, however, not that simple. After all, older people remember some things and forget others (*c.f.* Connerton 2009), and much more importantly, what and how they remember is deeply affected by meanings and concepts that the 'younger generation' has produced.

An outstanding example of this is found in Anna Karakasidou's (2019) work in Greek Macedonia, a very 'Greek' part of Greece. In her sensitive interviewing of older people, she unearthed memories of a Bulgarian and Turkish past and ancestry which local people found deeply problematic. These memories had to be carefully teased out because they severely disrupted the narrative of Greekness that the Macedonians she worked with articulated. I am deeply inspired by Karakasidou's insights which I bring to bear on the importance of exploring oral history accounts with care, as well as interrogating memory and forgetting across and within generations.

As the celebrated oral historian Alessandro Portelli (1997, 41) notes, facts and representations do not exist independently of each other: 'Representations work on facts and claim to be facts; facts are recognized and organized according to representations; facts and representations both converge on the subjectivity of human beings and are dressed in their language'. What happened is inseparable from why it happened and what meaning it has today if only because if it had no meaning it would not be

remembered. To put it another way: the transmission of 'memory' does not go from older to younger generations but younger generations influence the memories of older ones and events experienced in the present reconfigure memories of the past. That is, older generations continue to give new meanings to memories as they experience a developing presence in conversation with younger people.

Perhaps we shouldn't think of memory being 'transmitted' at all: there is a collaborative effort as to what is remembered and what is forgotten, what *ought* to be remembered and what *ought* to be forgotten, thus collapsing the distinctions between generations that we might otherwise take for granted. Malara and Dejene (2022) provide an example from Ethiopia where exorcists rhetorically collapse generations to 'manipulate time and refashion historical scripts (p.176)'. Something similar happens in Gibraltar, where large groups of people of different ages coalesce around a view of history, crisis, and conflict.

This remarkable coherence about history and national identity across generations does not hold across attitudes towards religion, sexuality, LGBT issues and so on. One possible reason for this is that 'history' is constantly breaking into Gibraltar's present; it is not abstract. As I write (March 2026), Gibraltarians anxiously await the dismantling of their border in April 2026 after the conclusion of Brexit negotiations the previous year. Gibraltarians' attitude to this change is deeply imbued by a largely shared sense of history which reads Spain as a perpetual aggressor and Spaniards as the enduring 'other'.

Tim Ingold invites us to understand generations as either a plaited rope or as linear stacks (2023, 4). While there is much to be said for thinking of generations as a rope, they in fact remain linear threads. My proposal is to think of generations as pleats which fold in on themselves and overlap. The folding in suggests a proximity whereby older generations affect younger and vice versa; this metaphor emphasizes that the transmission is most certainly not one way, as is illustrated in the flamenco dress depicted in Figure 1.

Using the traditional flamenco dress as a metaphor for generations works well visually because, when looking at a flamenco dress, you see very clear horizontal lines, as you can discern marked generations in a society, if only on the basis of age cohorts. But these horizontal bands are all folds rubbing up against each other: Generations, like the pleats, may *appear* to be discrete but the reality is that each pleat is created by a fold in the fabric and each is at least partly constructed by the fabric of the previous one. Time's arrow goes down the skirt in a linear fashion but the generations that time produces (but not time itself) fold in on themselves creating friction and warmth.

The novel *Kairos* by the Berlin writer, Jenny Erpinger, a semi-autobiographical account of the last days of the Berlin wall, reflects on two ways of understanding time, *kairos* and *chronos*. *Kairos* is that critical moment when change is possible, perhaps a time of crisis; *chronos* is time as a more measured unfolding. The concept of *kairos* is rooted in weaving, the moment when the threads of the warp are all aligned and the shuttle can shoot across to create the weft. To pursue the metaphor, if the warp is linear time then the weft is what creates the horizontal generations that give form to our understanding of time (the horizontal folds of the flamenco dress). *Kairos* then is that moment of generation. *Kairos* is also that moment when an archer releases the arrow, that very brief moment in time when it is opportune to act. In a similar way *kairos* is a time of crisis and change that generates a sense of shared experience. I read the concept of 'crisis' as developed in this volume as very much a moment of *Kairos*, and inflection point where change becomes possible.

**Figure 1.** Flamenco dress.

These perspectives lead me to eschew a linear presentation of Gibraltarian generations because there is no linearity. In reality, there is something much more interesting going on than 'uncovering' memories of the past. A linear schema, time as *chronos*, might be more elegant in its simplicity but it would not do justice to the twists and turns of memories across generations. *Chronos* implies a regular passing of time through which older generations can transmit knowledge to younger generations in a relatively uncomplicated and uncontested punctuated by moments of *Kairos* that disrupt this flow and create a sense of generations. In Gibraltar's case, I argue, the formation of a stable generational identity, that is, one with a coherent internal narrative over time, is interrupted by a

fairly constant state of crisis. The past cannot simply be laid to rest and requires, even demands, a continuous re-evaluation such that personal memories are insufficient for creating a coherent generational discourse and must be moulded by present events that project meaning onto the past.

## The bordering on Britishness project

The Bordering on Britishness project was an ESRC – funded oral history project on Gibraltarian identity in the twentieth century that sought to explore personal accounts and, where possible, to discover the hidden, or at least muted, histories of Gibraltarians.[4] The title reflected the sense that Gibraltarians are not *quite* as British as might appear to be the case at first sight and to raise an interrogative glance at the assumption that their Britishness is somehow given.

Although Gibraltar and the identity of its people have attracted considerable scholarship (e.g. Archer 2006; Garcia 1994; Jackson 1990; Stephen 2009) almost all of this history used English language sources, while the few oral history accounts were also largely interviewed in English (e.g. Norrie 2003). Grocott and Stockey (2012) are the notable exceptions[5] and, perhaps unsurprisingly, their research offers a different view of Gibraltar and its inhabitants (see also Stockey 2009). They suggest that there was more commonality and solidarity across the border than English language sources would suggest. Works published by Spanish scholars (e.g. Díaz Martínez 2010; Oda Ángel 1998; Ponce Alberca 2009, 2010) also stress continuity across the border as well as distinctions (and cite English as well as Spanish sources).

A key feature of the interviewing technique we utilized was first allowing the interviewee to simply tell their story of the past. Most older interviews immediately assumed we were most interested in their war time experiences, so they often started with that. The wartime evacuation of civilians (mostly women and children to the UK) is often cited as the event which led to Gibraltarians' closer association with the 'motherland' and when the English language became more dominant. This period reflects a *kairos* moment that formed a powerfully marked generation. Later in the interview or on a second occasion, some of the events were revisited when we approached the interviewee with a different kind of questioning. Instead of, for example, 'how did you celebrate Christmas?' it involved bringing people back to their childhood experiences, asking them who they saw every day, and then, once they were back in time, asking them to describe their Christmas activities.

Very often the two accounts differed. The first time, Christmas was celebrated on Christmas day, and Father Christmas would come with gifts by a tree; in the second interview, there was a family meal on Christmas Eve, and the Magi brought gifts on the Epiphany. No Father Christmas was to be seen. That is, with the first set of questions, a 'British Christmas' was projected into the past. Another common example of this phenomenon is people saying that they socialized with English people in, say, the 50s and 60s, but when brought back to those times, many confessed to not actually knowing any English people socially.

## The border as crisis

The closure of the border with Spain in 1969 was an undoubted critical inflection point in the history of Gibraltarian identity: a political, economic, and social crisis. In other words, a

*kairos* moment. Thousands of people who crossed the border daily to work had to remain at home in Spain and thousands of people living in Spain with Gibraltar identity papers had no choice but to either remain in their Spanish homes or seek new ones in (a densely populated) Gibraltar. This crisis has a huge 'before and after' generational effect when, among other things, Gibraltarians went abruptly from being part of an economic and social world that included the Spanish hinterland to one where there was no daily contact with Spain (a situation that lasted until a partial opening in 1983 and a full opening in 1985).

The town of La Línea transformed, literally overnight, from what was essentially a suburb of Gibraltar to a place where one could not even telephone relatives across the border since the Franco regime cut the telephone lines. People were reduced to sending message via the Gibraltar Spanish language radio broadcast or shouting across the gap between the two gates that separated Gibraltar from Spain. Bono and Stoeffelen (2022) demonstrate how profound the border closure was and is for Gibraltarian identity: Gibraltarians continue to read current events through the lens of their memories of the 1969 border closure (see also Buoli et al. 2024).

To continue the metaphor of the flamenco dress, the border closure can be represented by a high swish and rapid movement of the dress, the image blurs, the friction between the folds is intense but eventually the movement slows and the dress, which is a sense of generation and time becomes clear, at least for a while.

The Evacuation was not, by any means, the only crisis point that marked a generational difference in Gibraltar. The Second World War evacuation of Gibraltarian women and children to the UK, Madeira and Jamaica created another key inflection point that compelled people to make life-altering decisions, choose sides, and, for many Gibraltarians, gave them their first experience of life in the UK. But it would be incomplete, perhaps even false, to see these inflection points as simply marking generations, even as they most certainly do on one level. First, even though there were important continuities as well as discontinuities across these crisis points, in a very real sense, Gibraltarians have lived in a chronic state of identitarian crisis for at least a century. This issue never seems to go away: most local residents perceive that there has been a constant Spanish threat to Gibraltar, Gibraltarians, and Gibraltarianness since at least 1939.

However, here is another, equally constant threat, albeit less often articulated, of an ever-changing Britishness. In 1939 (the year the Spanish Civil War ended), Britain controlled an Empire and was about to engage in a World War where it ultimately proved victorious. This is the image of a successful and dominant Britain that, in many ways, Gibraltarians are still drawn to. The UK today is economically and politically infinitely weaker than it was then, provoking clear and enduring debates about what Britishness means in the UK, let alone in Gibraltar. For Gibraltarians, this sense of continual crisis is compounded by an unease created by the fact that, for the vast majority, their genealogical origins do not lie in the UK at all.

Our project's title, *Bordering on Britishness*, refers to how the physical border between Gibraltar and Spain, in many ways, has created a Gibraltarian identity. As anthropologist Dieter Haller (2000) noted, the border (especially since 1969) has generated an increased sense of shared identity, a 'deep territorialisation' (Haller 2000, 79), and the creation of a hitherto non-existent national identity and national consciousness. This is accounted for by the border with Spain and the threat Gibraltarians feel from the Spanish state while at

the same time being increasingly conscious of a lack of interest on the part of the UK towards Gibraltar and its border problems. The border is experienced bodily through the frustrations and petty harassments that typify a border crossing, and these experiences produce and reinforce a disidentification with Spain and all things Spanish (Haller 2000, 179). While Gibraltarians share much with Andalusians in the immediate vicinity – commonalities in culture and language as well as important kinship links – this is de-emphasized as border harassments tease out the differences in ever-sharper colours. It is the border that has created a Gibraltarian national identity rather than more typically, nationalism creating the border (Canessa 2019).

## Generations, genealogies, and gender

There are many ways of thinking about generations in Gibraltar. We can think of them in a genealogical way where patrilineal lines – and the generations they produce – are remembered and matrilineal lines are simply forgotten. This is, perhaps, generations at its simplest but this muting of Spanish matrilineality informs what we understand as generations in terms of historical cohorts; an emphasis on patrilineality and continuities works to downplay generational distinctions, again as a way of asserting a shared history against the evidence of experience. Not only is there a pronounced gendered difference in the geographical and ethnic origins of many within these cohorts, but they also continue to experience historical events in different ways.

The 'WWII generation', after all, comprised (often Spanish) women and their children living in the UK, whereas the men remained in Gibraltar and mingled with the Spanish men and women who crossed the border daily throughout the war. One of the most salient narratives of Gibraltarian identity is that this UK experience forged a British Gibraltarian consciousness: a profoundly generative moment. Gibraltarian men, however, although they formed part of this generation, had lived experiences that were radically different from the iconic UK ones that women and children experienced and that have been imagined to shape a new British-oriented generation.

As only a minority of Gibraltarians claim descent from UK ancestors, the majority discourse centres on stressing the Genoese and Maltese aspects of one's personal identity. One of the striking elements that we found in the *Bordering on Britishness* project is the almost universal ability of people to recite long family trees to the 'first' Gibraltarian. For many people, these (patrilineal) genealogies were recalled, going back eight generations, and four and five were very common. As Kellerman (2001, 22) succinctly puts it:

> The heterogeneous nature of the genealogical line is an argument Gibraltarians regularly employ to dissociate themselves from their unloved neighbours, with whom they not only share a common language but also their Latin looks. This level of knowledge of ancestry, although not unusual in cultures with ancestor cults or settler states in the Americas and Australasia, is highly unusual in Europe. Ethnic or national legitimacy is based on *not* being autochthonous. Being identified as having Spanish origin in contemporary terms is problematic because if there is one thing Gibraltarians are, it is *not* Spanish.

This poses something of a problem for Gibraltarians with Spanish surnames and many of our interviewees (but not all) were clearly uncomfortable in explaining that their origins

were Spanish. Some asserted their maternal connections to a Genoese/Maltese/UK ancestor and others claimed their unambiguously Spanish surname was, in fact, Italian or had been changed by unscrupulous Spanish priests when arriving in Gibraltar. An analysis of church records shows no evidence that this ever happened. It is thus not only memories that are muted but genealogical lineages as well.

The generational moments are complex and collaborative, where children are not only the 'new generation' but are agents in the ways their parents' generation was reimagined by the parents themselves. 'We all came back speaking English' is a common trope of the WWII experience and one that is widely acknowledged even though it is manifestly the case that many of the women eased themselves back into a Spanish-speaking world, which, in any case, they maintained in the UK. The folds of the flamenco dress obscure much of the structure and fabric of the skirt, and there is more material within the dark folds than visible on the surface. Intergenerational relations are dynamic and frictional, but it is all held together by a common purpose: to create a meaningful personal and political identity for the present day. To do this, the past needs to be constantly worked and reworked, in personal memory and generational expression, in order to face off the contemporary and continuing crisis.

Another important element is the elision of Spanish *women* from the personal (and indeed official) historical record. Burke and Sawchuk (2001) estimate that in the decades leading up to the Second World War, up to a third of marriages contracted in Gibraltar were between Gibraltarian men and Spanish women (Sawchuk and Walz 2003). While this may seem high, it was far greater in earlier periods. For example, in the first half of the nineteenth century, only a small minority of local marriages was between two people born in Gibraltar (and thus British subjects). The 1834 census records that only 7% of marriages fell into that category compared to 80% of marriages between two 'aliens' (Burke and Sawchuk 2001, 534). There were scarcely any marriages between UK-born subjects and others in Gibraltar, as only 8% of the civilian population was UK born in 1840 (Stephen 2009, 103).[6] In 1870, with the passage of the Naturalization Act, wives were declared to enjoy the citizenship of their husbands (but not vice versa) (Stephen 2009, 117). In Gibraltar, this meant that Spanish wives of Gibraltarian men would become British and Gibraltarian wives of Spanish men would become Spanish. Given the considerable economic and social benefits of holding Gibraltarian (and British) status, it is hardly surprising that marrying a Gibraltarian man would be seen as advantageous.

The Naturalisation Act, however, serves to obscure the Spanish origin of so many wives and mothers in Gibraltar. Censuses would register them as British Gibraltarians even though they had been born and raised in Spain, thus obscuring the Spanish contribution to the Gibraltar population. As Kellerman (2001, 26) notes,

> It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the true number of Spanish citizens, more accurately that of Spanish women who married local men. No figures are published, and through marriage and subsequent naturalization, the numbers are further obscured. Undoubtedly, their contingent is much larger than the Gibraltarians, who never tire of playing down the amount of Spanish blood currently throbbing through their veins, would like to have it.

## British Gibraltarians

The conflation of the Britishness of its civilian population with the Britishness of its territory is not as clear cut as one might suppose. The oft-repeated phrase 'We have been British since 1704' points to an undisputable historical fact – the capturing of Gibraltar by Anglo-Dutch forces in the War of Spanish Succession – but elides the equally indisputable historical fact that Gibraltar's civilian population overwhelmingly had its origins in Genoa and Morocco for much of the eighteenth century, followed in the nineteenth, by the infusion of large numbers of Spaniards and Maltese, and by Spaniards (mostly women), and people from India through the first half of the twentieth. Having a largely immigrant population does not *ipso facto* make the population un-British, but the language and customs of the population well into the twentieth century were decidedly *not* British. Genoese was widely spoken in Gibraltar, and used in official edicts, well into the nineteenth century, and English only became the language spoken at home for a large number of Gibraltarians at the very end of the twentieth century.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Governor Sir Robert Wilson could write that 'the greater part of the Native Inhabitants of Gibraltar are Aliens in all respects where their religion, language and Spanish connections are concerned' (Stephen 2009, 111–12). Gibraltarians were only officially recognized as such (i.e. as opposed to 'natives') in 1885 when the Aliens Council declared that:

> Only Gibraltarian-born inhabitants were entitled to reside in the colony. Everyone else, including citizens of the United Kingdom, had to have residence permits … The Gibraltarian had thus been given an official identity for the first time. (Jackson 1990, 248)

Gibraltarians may have been given an 'official' identity but there is no evidence that residents of Gibraltar in any way thought of themselves as culturally different from their neighbours. They simply had the right of abode in Gibraltar. In fact, as Grocott et al. show (2019), there is considerable evidence that there were substantial cultural connections and even political solidarity across the border as, for example, many Gibraltarians were deeply involved in various aspects of the Spanish Civil War on both sides of the conflict.

Gibraltarian nationalism is still, however, tied to Britishness: 'Yes, I speak English with an accent, but so does someone from Scotland or Wales. We are British in the same way they are'.[7] This encapsulates a Gibraltar with its own flag and anthem but also underlines the fact that this identity is tied to the UK. Not all Gibraltarians, however, are comfortable with this sense of Britishness: 'What's happened now is that we imagine ourselves to be blue-eyed, blond Brits; and we are not!'[8] This particular interviewee, a 57-year-old man at the time of interview, was describing the process of mimesis articulated by Taussig (1993) by which Gibraltarians have *become* (or tried to become) British in an explicitly UK sense in the course of his lifetime. The concept of mimesis in a colonial context is important because the behaviours it generates go beyond mimicry, into an adoption of the mores, speech, and identity of the colonizer whilst rejecting, internally as much as externally, the original native culture.[9]

There could scarcely be a better description of the Gibraltar situation. Gibraltarians have gone from having a sharp consciousness as colonial subjects to adopting a colonial

mentality themselves. What is particularly interesting about this process is that, perhaps unique in British colonial history, this identification was actively encouraged by British colonial officials from at least the 1940s although it took a (post)imperial war (the Falklands) for the UK to grant full British citizenship to Gibraltarians. From what interviewees expressed to us, a key element in this process was the economic and political advantages of associating with a powerful Britain as opposed to an impoverished and conflicted Spain. In addition, there was the sense, actively and explicitly encouraged by colonial officers, of creating a sense of racial superiority vis a vis their Spanish neighbours. Either way, this process requires a repression of certain memories and an enhanced recollection of others such that collective memory, and more specifically personal memory of an historical period, is never quite settled.

In the case of the aforementioned interviewee, he also recalled swelling with pride as a child when an Englishman commented on how well he spoke English but found it quite impossible to imagine an opposite situation where someone would comment on his good Spanish (in which our interview was conducted). This interviewee was educated in a private boys' primary school for, as he put it, the Gibraltarian upper classes where speaking English was highly valued. It is telling that he remembers going to state secondary school and observing boys from other schools and that 'they seemed darker (skinned) somehow, more Spanish'. There is no reason to think that these boys were phenotypically different (a point readily conceded by the interviewee) but they *seemed* darker, their otherness coded in an imaginary pigmentation. This is an example of where the process of othering that mimesis entails is not just the othering of Spaniards but the othering of fellow Gibraltarians (Taussig 1993).

What many of the interviews demonstrated was that Gibraltarians often essentialized differences ('The Spaniard is a different animal'; 'We are *biologically* different [to the Spanish]'), but also that contemporary identities are projected into the past. Many Gibraltarians will refer to Gibraltarian democracy, the rule of law, and civil rights as something that distinguishes them from Spaniards, even as they ignore the fact that Gibraltar, until relatively recently, was a Crown colony ruled by a military and colonial administration.

A simple example of Taussig's concept of mimesis is given by a drawing on a traffic bollard in Gibraltar's Main Street today, which recalls a banner that was displayed in 1967 in Gibraltar's outpouring of Britishness: '263 Years of freedom and democracy enjoyed under the British flag to which the Rock will remain forever. God Save our Queen'.[10]

In 1967, Gibraltarians voted in a referendum on whether to remain British or become Spanish and the former won with an overwhelming majority. In 1967, Spain was a fascist state but Gibraltar had yet to develop any kind of representative democracy. That came with the establishment of the House of Assembly in 1969. Until then, Gibraltar was a Garrison and Colony with no democratic rights whatsoever. It is only through a process of mimesis and identification with Britishness that the banner (and its contemporary reproduction) makes any sense at all (Figures 2 and 3).

In practice and lived reality, the process of mimesis is riddled with tension, fissures, and contradictions. Upper-class Gibraltarians are much more likely to be able to display the more obvious signs of Britishness (e.g. English spoken in received pronunciation, rather than a Gibraltarian accent), but this is not quite so simple either: until the border

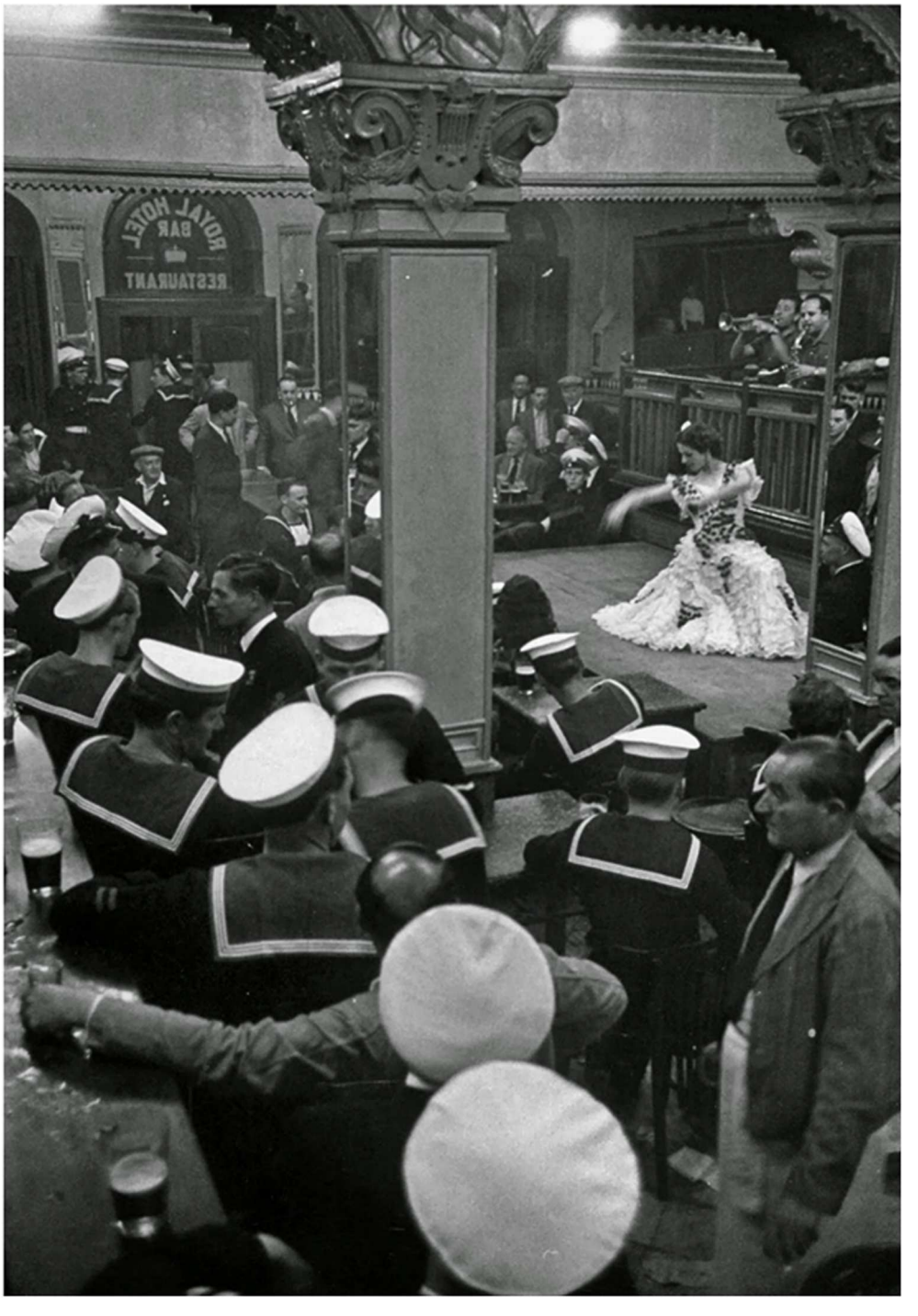


**Figure 2.** The Royal Hotel Bar, Gibraltar 1953. Ralph Crane.

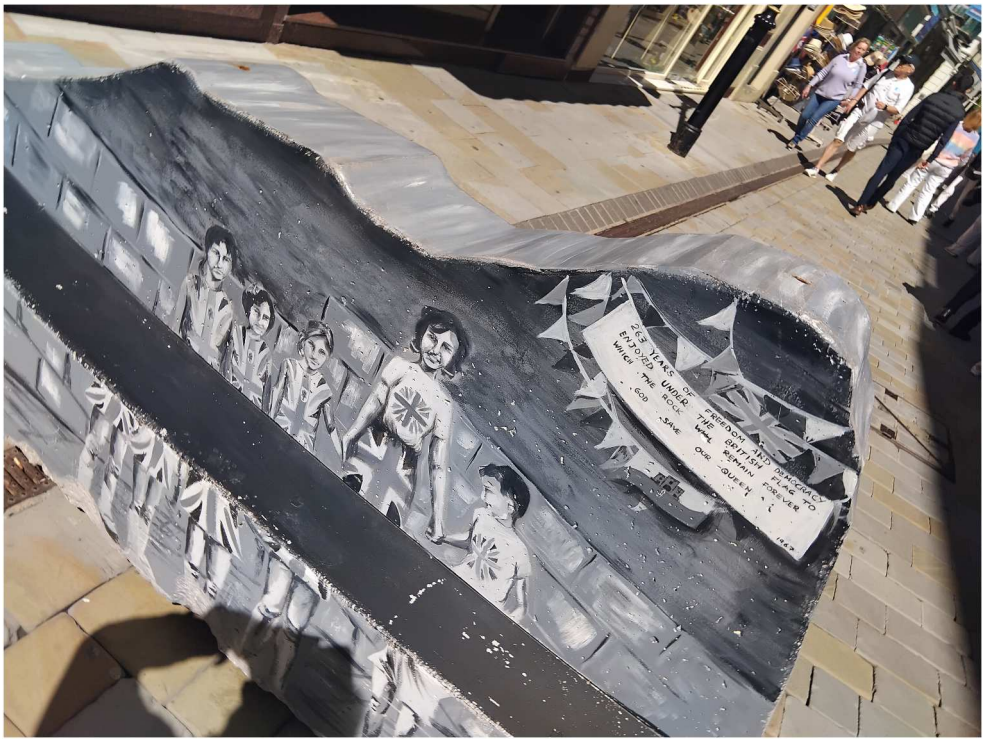


**Figure 3.** Bollard in Main Street Gibraltar. Photo by Author.

closure, many upper-class Gibraltarians had close dealings with Spain, with business and other interests and intermarried with Spanish families. Their children and grandchildren are more likely to live in wealthy Spanish enclaves than they are to live in the Gibraltarian British one. What perhaps has changed over time is that working-class Gibraltarians have all but disappeared as an identifiable group as economic and educational opportunities since the 1970s have meant that most Gibraltarians are comfortably middle-class in their consumption patterns as well as employment.

The 14,000 or so people who cross the border daily have moved into those labouring occupations as well as other, more skilled, ones. The cross-border working-class solidarity that was such a feature of twentieth-century Gibraltar/Spanish social relations has not exactly disappeared but is seriously attenuated (Grocott, Stockey, and Grady 2019). Nowadays, as our interviews show, it is among Gibraltarians with a working-class background who were brought up speaking Spanish before English that one is more likely to find the most passionate anti-Spanish sentiments expressed. Perhaps this is unsurprising: if one's 'British' identity is insecure, it makes sense to assert it most volubly.

It seems likely that this process is what fuels the 'forgetting' – or strategic downplaying – of a time, well within living memory, when there was an intense commonality with people across the border – the kinship, sociality, and culture. One of the most frequent patterns we saw in our interviews was someone speaking in English talking about a very British identity which was projected into the past but then moving to Spanish and, at the prompting of the interviewer, remembering things quite differently.

One man with a Spanish mother recalled how he and his cousins would all meet every Sunday in the summer to spend the day on the beach across the border in Spain. This, of course, stopped with the border closure but did not resume when it opened. He remembers these Sundays with great nostalgia but says he only sees his cousins when there is a family funeral now. When asked why, he replied, 'I don't really know, back then we were all family, and then, well, they became more Spanish and we became more … '. He was unable or unwilling to finish the sentence. It is interesting that he attributes the change to his Spanish cousins rather than recognize the huge cultural shifts happening in Gibraltar. His comments also reflect the way that identities are not fixed: both he and his cousins are in a process of becoming even if he is unclear what that becoming means for him.

This furthermore suggests that not only are identities not fixed over time, but they are also not fixed across generations. One way of reading the last 100 years of British Gibraltar is a process of becoming ever more British even as that 'Britishness' is, in itself, an evolving category. And if everyone is in a process of becoming, then generational differences are strategically downplayed if not erased. People born, say, in the 1930s may have been brought up in a very Spanish cultural and linguistic environment but, if still alive today, may identify very strongly with British culture and the English language. Although from a historical perspective the differences between 1930s Gibraltar and today are immense, from a generational perspective they may be, in fact, rather muted or downplayed.

Another man remembers his summers across the border and that all his playmates, apart from his brother, were Spanish.

> Yes, we spent every day together. The only difference was that I could speak English with my brothers but there really wasn't much occasion for that. The thing is, now that I remember, there was no difference between us.

On yet other occasions, the phrase 'we are as British as anyone from Scotland or Wales' (i.e. with a non-English accent but British) was later unconsciously qualified by painful tales of humiliation at not having been accepted socially by English people, being excruciatingly aware of their non-standard English, being asked to leave the tennis club for speaking Spanish, not being allowed entry into one establishment or another, and so on. In fact, when prompted, many Gibraltarians can recall what it was like to be second-class citizens in Gibraltar. Up to the 1960s, separate toilets for (UK) British, Gibraltarians, and Spaniards were in place not only at the Royal Naval Dockyards but also in the offices of *Cable and Wireless Company*. Gibraltarians' wages were different from UK British people until 1978, and many people remember when English people were always served ahead of Gibraltarians in shops or being made to understand that they were not 'one of us'; that is, UK British.

## Border and memory

The border functions as a quintessential *lieu de mémoire*, a place around which memories coalesce and become history. Pierre Nora's (1989) *lieux de mémoires* stresses the importance of the spatial dimension of collective memory. These places include physical sites such as burial grounds, religious sites and battle sites as well as intangible ones such

as historical figures, celebrations and rites, and in Gibraltar, the border. These lieux de *mémoires* have a particular role to play in modern societies where there is no longer a 'tradition of memory' (*ibid*.:11; see also Connerton 2009) that characterized a fundamentally peasant society in which memories were transmitted across generations in a relatively unproblematic way. This is time as *chronos*, measured and uncontested.

The border between Gibraltar and Spain is not simply a site that can be understood 'historically' but a *lieu de mémoire* that is open to constant (re)interpretation. In our terms, it is a site of *kairos*, a series of generative moments across time that creates a personal orientation to the place and event and, as such, produces 'generations'. The generation before and after the border was established in 1937, the generation before and after the border closures in 1969, and its full opening in 1985 combine with a whole series of personal events to mark people's sense of space and time. Aside from the major border 'events' listed here, there is a sense that the border creates a perpetual sense of crisis that is experienced every time one crosses it. We might think of these as mini *kairos* events but ones which nevertheless generate a positionality with respect to history with a powerful cohort effect which marks a 'generation'.

Only in 1909 did the British erect a fence across the sandy isthmus separating Gibraltar and Spain in order to reduce the manpower required to control smuggling (Jackson 1990); it was only during the Spanish Civil War that there were any restrictions imposed on people crossing the border at all. Even so, there were very few limits on people moving across until the 1950s.

It is fair to say that until mid-last century, Gibraltar and La Línea functioned as one town intimately tied by culture, language, economy, and kinship, even if they belonged to two national jurisdictions (Oda 2019). For much of the twentieth century, working-class Gibraltarians and their neighbours immediately across the border had no differences in language, the music they listened to, the bullfights they attended, the religion most of them practised, and so on. When pressed to identify differences in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, people we interviewed would mention, 'they smoked different cigarettes' or say that Spaniards wore inferior footwear; that is, essentially economic differences.

When asked who the Spanish people in their lives were in mid-century Gibraltar, people interviewees without exception talked about the fishmonger, the hawker, the grocer, the barber, and so on. No one mentioned their mothers, aunts, and grand – mothers who were born in Spain. These were not 'Spanish' Much less did people essentialize differences between Gibraltarians and Spaniards as they so often do today. Spanishness is thus much more about geographical location than anything that could be described as an ethnic difference. 'In those days, you lived here and I lived there, and everyone was from his own town … there was no need [to talk about] sovereignty' or 'In those days you were from Algeciras, San Roque, Gibraltar … that was it'.

For example, when someone who grew up in a *patio*, a multiple-occupancy building shared by several families, in the 1950s, was asked about this, he thought carefully and said there was no way he could identify which of the women in the patio was Spanish born or from Gibraltar. The 'Spanish' woman was María from La Atunara.[11] What made her Spanish was that she crossed the border every day, not that she was somehow ethnically different.

In a relatively short space of time, Gibraltarians have gone from being British colonial subjects to British citizens who imagine themselves as having the same status as, say, people in Wales vis-à-vis the UK: certainly not English but British nevertheless. What provoked this contemporary sense of Britishness is first and foremost the Spanish campaign to 'take back' Gibraltar, which began in 1940 but developed with increasing intensity until Franco's death in 1975 and culminated in the full closure of the border in 1969–1985. Much of contemporary anti-Spanishness in Gibraltar has its roots in this period, which generated a profound mistrust of Spanish politicians and people alike and which is often articulated in strident terms by local politicians.

## Conclusions

It is not simply that

> generations have been so prised apart that they no longer overlap but, rather, stack up as Ingold (2023) suggests. With the consequent breakdown of everyday intergenerational relations, elders are prevented from introducing young people into traditional lifeways, as they used to do. (Ingold 2023, 103)

No one in Gibraltar is 'preventing' grandparents from speaking Spanish to their grandchildren; they clearly, in most cases, insist upon doing so (with remarkably few exceptions).

When it comes to national identity, the vast majority of Gibraltarians, young and old, articulate a British Gibraltarian identity stretching back to 1704. Even if their ancestors arrived much more recently than that, they claim that history, much in the same way that many Americans will say 'we' fought the British for independence, when none of their ancestors were in America at that time. They will stress difference over similarity with their Spanish neighbours, even quite essentialized differences, and flexibly elide the fact that their mothers or grandmothers were Spanish.

Gibraltarian Britishness (as indeed Britishness everywhere) is a constantly changing identity and means different things at different times. For much of the history of the last two centuries at least, being aligned with British Gibraltar meant better employment, a higher living standard, and, in the twentieth century, freedom from Spanish fascism. In the twenty-first century, being British rather than Spanish has meant that Gibraltar now enjoys one of the highest GDP per capita rates in the world. The economic differences, always significant, are now huge, especially when considering the Spanish neighbouring province is the poorest in Spain.

Even though the life experiences of the present generation and those in their 90s are profoundly different, asserting a proximity to Spanishness runs the risk of eliciting discomfort, if not downright disapproval and criticism. Very little is transmitted across generations in terms of historical memory that disrupts the discourse of Gibraltarian Britishness and Spanish alterity; in contrast, all generations project an understanding of contemporary reality onto a past, even if it contradicts lived experience. The transmission of knowledge from one generation to the other is thus neither simple nor linear but a folding in on itself as, and on this issue at least, a common discourse is forged across generations.

If we consider the themes of crisis and generation developed here, we can clearly see marked generations in Gibraltar punctuated by the *kairos* of the Spanish Civil War, WWII,

the Border Closure and then opening and, more recently by Brexit. But to return to the metaphor of the flamenco dress, even though the horizontal pleats are clearly visible; what is striking is the uniformity of the colour and texture of the garment. That is, across generations there is a coherent narrative of who 'we' are that elides and obscures people's lived experiences in a deliberate and collaborative project of generational collapsing. This is perhaps because, with the exception of WWII, all of these points of inflection can be read, in one way or another, as a response to the Spanish 'threat' to Gibraltarian identity or even Gibraltarians' very existence. It is perhaps this constancy that produces – even requires – a coherent narrative of history across generations.

Gibraltarians are on the verge of a new *Kairos*: in 2026, the border between Gibraltar and Spain is set to disappear and will not be able to function as a divider between 'us' and 'them'. This is not to say that there will be no distinction, but, rather, that the physical border will be unable to play the role it has played in creating Gibraltar and articulating difference with Spain and Spaniards. We are on the verge of a new generation – the 'no border generation'. It is an open question how Gibraltarians over time adjust to their new political (and economic) situation and how this new generation creates meaning as it rubs against not only the memories of older generations but their very own. The flamenco dress of Gibraltarian generation and identity will swing energetically high creating friction between the folds, but will eventually settle, if only for a while, and offer a stable vision of generations, even if only for a while.

## Notes

1. Other 19th and 20th century categories include 'Native Hebrew', 'Maltese', Moor', 'British Indian'.
2. *Gibraltar Chronicle*, 31 January 1913, p. 2. (in Picardo 2019). In one of Britain's oldest colonies one would expect to hear English. In my meanderings I have not heard a word of it. I might as well have been in La Línea!
3. As Koreen Reece points out, here rewriting family and national histories goes hand in hand.
4. The project counted on the collaboration of the government of Gibraltar and the Gibraltar Garrison Library, in particular its Director, Jennifer Ballantine Perera, who was the Project Partner. Interviews were conducted by locally recruited researchers drawn from all sectors of the community as well as researchers from La Línea, the Spanish town which borders Gibraltar.
5. But see also Haller's (2000) ethnographic account which included ethnographic interviews in English and Spanish.
6. The situation by 1868 was even worse for those in Gibraltar concerned about its Britishness. As Constantine reports, of a total population of 17,764 calculated by Police Magistrate F. Solly Flood, only 582 (3%) were 'British' (i.e. UK born). He does note the presence of 984 'natives of British origin', which we can surmise were descendants of someone with UK origins, but a large number of these had 'become incorporated in the popula- tion of alien character' (in Constantine: 112). The twentieth-century distinction between UK British who settled for a short period and those who intermarried and 'became' Gibraltarian has its roots in this period. Well into the second half of the twentieth century, the children of, say, UK-born fathers married to Gibraltarian women would be predominantly Spanish speaking.
7. BoB interview April 17, 2016.
8. BoB interview April 17, 2016.
9. For a further discussion of mimesis in the colonial situation, see Bahbha (1984).
10. Dutch National Archives. Inventarisnummer 350026 Bestanddeelnummer 350026_003.
11. La Atunara is a fishing village now absorbed into La Línea although it is a far older.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by ESRC: [Grant Number ES/K006223/1].

## References

Archer, E. G. 2006. *Gibraltar, Identity and Empire*. London: Routledge.

Babha, Homi. 1984, October. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." In *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984)*, Vol. 28, 125–133. The MIT Press.

Bono, Federica, and Ari Stoeffelen. 2022. "Bottom-up Geopolitics and Everyday Brexits at the Gibraltar-Spain Border." *GEOPOLITICS* 27 (5): 1528–1551.

Buoli, Alice, Alessandro Frigerio, Laura Montedoro, and Isabella Traeger. 2024. "Investigating the Urban Response to Border Closure in a Transnational Metropolitan System: The case of the Gibraltar/Algeciras Bay." In *International Planning History Society Proceedings, 20th IPHS Conference, "The (High Density) Metropolis and Region in Planning History," Hong Kong, 2 - 5 July, 2024*, edited by Ian Morley, and Hendrik Tieben, 229–243. Delft: TU Delft Open.

Burke, Stephen, and Larry Sawchuk. 2001. "Alien Encounters: The *jus soli* and Reproductive Politics in the 19th Century Fortress and Colony of Gibraltar." *History of the Family* 6:531–561.

Canessa, Andrew, ed. 2019. *Bordering on Britishness: National Identity in Gibraltar from the Spanish Civil War to Brexit*. London: Palgreave.

Connerton, Paul. 2009. *How Modernity Forgets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Díaz Martínez, Beatriz. 2010. *Camino de Gibraltar. Dependencia y Sustento en La Línea y Gibraltar*. Sevilla: Delegación Provincial de Salud de la Junta de Andalucía.

Garcia, Joseph. 1994. *Gibraltar. The Making of a People. The Modern Political History of Gibraltar and Its People*. Gibraltar: Mediterranean SUN Publishing.

Grocott, Chris, and Gareth Stockey. 2012. *Gibraltar. A Modern History*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Grocott, Chris, Gareth Stockey, and Jo Grady. 2019. "Cross-Frontier Class Solidarities in Gibraltar and the Campo, 1880–1928 and Beyond." In *Bordering on Britishness: National Identity in British Gibraltar from the Spanish Civil War to Brexit*, edited by Andrew Canessa, 67–90. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haller, Dieter. 2000. *Gelebte Grenze Gibraltar: Transnationalismus, Lokalität und Identität in kulturanthropologischer Perspektive*. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag.

Ingold, Tim. 2023. *The Rise and Fall of Generation Now*. London: Polity.

Jackson, William. 1990. *The Rock of the Gibraltarians. A History of Gibraltar*. Grendon: Gibraltar Books.

Jenkins, Simon. 2013. The Falklands and Gibraltar Deny the Logic of History.

Karakasidou, Anna. 2019. *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870-1990*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Kellerman, Anna. 2001. *A "New" New English. Language, Politics and Identity in Gibraltar*. Heidelberg: BoD.

Malara, Diego Maria, and Bethlehem Hailu Dejene. 2022. "Possessed by the Post-socialist Zeitgeist." In *History, Spirits, and the Problem of Generational (dis)Continuity in Ethiopian Orthodox Exorcism*, edited by Dejene Malara, 160–177. London: Bloomsbury.

Nora, Pierra. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les *lieux de mémoires*." *Representations* 26:7–24.

Norrie, C. 2003. "The Last Rock in the Empire: Evacuation, Identity, and Myth in Gibraltar." *Oral History* XXXIV (1): 73–84.

Oda, Francico. 2019. "The Beauty of the Inexplicable." In *Bordering on Britishness National Identity in Gibraltar from the Spanish Civil War to Brexit*, edited by Andrew Canessa. London: Palgrave.

Oda Ángel, Francisco. 1998. *Gibraltar, la herencia oblicua: aproximación sociológica al contencioso*. Cádiz: Diputación de Cádiz.
Picardo, Eddie. 2019. "Borders, Language Shift, and Colonialism in Gibraltar, 1940–1985." In *Bordering on Britishness National Identity in Gibraltar from the Spanish Civil War to Brexit*, edited by Andrew Canessa, 1940–1985. London: Palgrave.
Ponce Alberca, J. 2010. "La Guerra Civil y el Peñón de Gibraltar." *Historia Contemporánea* 41:321–343.
Ponce Alberca, Julio. 2009. *Gibraltar and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–39: Local, National and International Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury.
Portelli, Alessandro. 1997. "The Massacre at Civitella Val di Chiana (Tuscany, June 29, 1944)." In *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, edited by Portelli, 177–193. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Sanchez, M. G. 2006. *Writing the Rock of Gibraltar: An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1720-1890*. Gibraltar: Rock Scorpion Books.
Sawchuk, Larry, and L. Walz. 2003. "The Gibraltarian Identity and Early 20th Century Marriage Practice." *Gibraltar Heritage Journal* 10:81–90.
Stephen, Constantine. 2009. *Community and Identity: The Making of Modern Gibraltar Since 1704*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Stockey, Gareth. 2009. *Gibraltar: A Dagger in the Spine of Spain?* Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
Taussig, Michael. 1993. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. London: Taylor and Francis.
Thompson, Paul. 2000 [1983]. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: OUP.
Ward, Stuart. 2023. *United Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.