

Gerwarth, Robert; Manela, Erez: *Empires at War. 1911–1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-870251-1; 304 S.

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Empires are messy. For long, historians gave up the idea that Empires are built upon a simple center-periphery relationship. For Gerwarth and Manela, we cannot simply subsume events in Africa, Asia and the Americas as minor theatres of the First World War as it was done by many historians who based their analysis on the events and outcomes of the Western Front in Europe. Putting empires at the forefront of historical analysis of the First World War, the book offers a perspective that helps us to de-provincialize our understanding of this historical period. One of the major advantages of this volume is that it gathers more than a dozen experts of global history, who look at the war from the angle of their case study.

„Empires at war“ edited by Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela argues that we have to take the global dimension of the First World War much more serious than historians have did before. It were after all not (only) nations that went to war in 1914, but foremost multi-ethnic empires. Neither were Europeans sleepwalking into the abyss nor was this catastrophe an entirely European affair. What befell Europeans and Asians in 1914 was not so much nationalist fervor but rather the consequence of an imperial century. This century had its winners and losers, it had its defenders of the status quo as well as its contenders for a greater share of geopolitical power. In this imperial century, the British Empire was the dominant power, only seriously contested by the French in Africa, the Japanese in Asia and the US in the Pacific. Once powerful empires like the Portuguese and the Ottoman Empire had lost their glory and much of their former territories. It were the Austrians and Russians at the Balkans and the Italians in North Africa who were eager to succeed the Ottomans. The German Empire tried to extend its influence over Eastern Europe as well as in parts of Africa and

the Middle East at the cost of the Russian and the British Empires. The Russian Empire had been stopped in its drive eastwards by Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/05. If one follows the argument of the book, the July crisis of 1914 was, as Gerwarth and Manela outline in their introduction, only an episode in a chain of events that led to the outbreak of the war in the heart of Europe and its expansion to other parts of the world. The editors see in the Second Balkan war of 1912/13 and the Italian conquest of Libya in 1911 two major events on the road to the war. For the Ottomans, the First World War was an opportunity as well as it became a question of survival. The interpretation of the war as a Christian aggression, as contributing Mustafa Aksakal argues, helped the Ottomans to re-define their empire as a Muslim and Turkish project. This was some sort of a nationalist project in an imperial dress. The alliance with a European power, Germany, gave them the hope to regain some of their former territories. While the Turkish military failed to secure the survival of the Ottoman Empire, they became successful nation-builders: The Turkish nation was a result of the First World War.

This resembles the Italian case (by Richard Bosworth and Giuseppe Finaldi): In their search for a national future Italians looked for an imperial past. A late-comer in the scramble for Africa, the Italians tried to gather the pieces that the French and the British left in Northern Africa from the debris of the Ottoman Empire. The global conflict became therefore an opportunity for the Italians to overcome their military and political short-comings by allying with the British and French. For the Italians, the First World War was indeed an imperial project. This imperial agenda, however, was not uncontested among Italian politicians and the military. Most imperial powers saw similar debates over their war aims. While the British, as Bill Nasson shows in his chapter on British Imperial Africa, entered the war with a clear interpretation of its imperial dimensions, the case with other imperial powers is somehow harder to evaluate. Regarding the German case, Heather Jones suggests, we have not only to look at its overseas possessions but also on the inner fabric of German empire. Al-

though the German Empire established itself as a colonial power in Africa and Asia and an informal power in the Middle East, its imperial ambitions were mainly directed at Eastern Europe. The territorial expansion in Eastern Europe was at the heart of its war aims, so its engagement for securing its oversea colonies was negligible. This narrowness of the German Empire's strategic thinking was, I would suggest, a reason for its failure in this global conflict. Portugal in contrast, Filipe Ribeiro de Menezes demonstrates in his chapter, entered the war only on the African soil. Their war aims were solely directed at the preservation and extension of their Empire in Africa. Not the Germans, who invaded Portuguese colonies during the war, but Africans, who responded to the brutality and weakness of the Portuguese regime, became their main enemy.

The First World War was certainly a war of empires, but was it also a war for empire, not only against rival powers but also within the empire itself? For the Habsburg Empire, as Peter Haslinger argues, the war was more than attempt to regain lost territories and influence in the Balkans. It was a war for the preservation of the Empire against the forces of nationalism. This was connected to an imperial ideology of cultural development of Eastern Europe. The Habsburg rulers, however, failed to sustain their geographic and cultural center as a glue for the Empire that was increasingly threatened by regional identities, which, as a consequence of war, gave way to nationalist movements. The Russian Empire proves even a more striking example for the decline of an imperial project during the war, as Joshua Sanborn shows. Its colonial territories in the West and in the Caucasus became main battlefields of the First World War. The Russian military did not only fight against other Empires, but, on the same battlefields, also colonial wars against rebellious societies. The war contributed to militarization of colonial relationships that eventually destroyed the thin fabric of the Russian Empire.

„Empire“ was of significant importance to mobilize manpower and resources to fight the war. Hundreds of thousands Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Indians and Africans fought on the various battlefields in

Europe, Africa and Asia. Another hundred thousands of people from all over the French and British Empire were recruited as laborers for the war effort. Though many historians have acknowledged this contribution of Asians and Africans to the war effort of the Allies, „Empires at war“, however, goes beyond this simple acknowledgment. Much of the book deals with the mobilization of resources for the war effort and its consequences for the fabric of empires. Although the British Empire's entry into the war in Europe was met with some enthusiasm by the people of the dominions, it was much harder to sustain the recruiting drive as the war went into its third and fourth year. British failures on the battlefields in France and at Gallipoli destroyed the image of its military might, notably among the Indian recruits. Such perceptions, however, took a long road towards a general disaffection with British imperialism. The fight against racial prejudices among the white officers, for fair pay and the fulfillment of promises, however, paved the way for a transformation. Bill Nasson shows how the British had to overcome the reluctance of the settler communities in South and East Africa and the fragile state of an only recently won dominance over African populations. The war became therefore a test for the compromise between the Boer population and the British in South Africa and a test for colonial rule elsewhere in British Africa. Although the British finally won the support of the South Africans, this came with a price. The South African politicians were not so much interested in saving the Empire on the European battlefields, but in extending their influence over the former German colonies.

What Richard Bosworth and Giuseppe Finaldi describe as the „customary lethargy“ of colonial rule in Italian Eritrea was characteristic for many peripheral regions of empires, where colonial officials had been forced into compromises with local societies either by their continuing resistance or the lack of resources to implement colonial politics, or by a combination of both. The war effort threatened such compromises, and often local societies responded by passive means of resistance, and if that did not work, with open rebellion. Resistance against forced labor

and recruitment throughout colonial empires, however, was often a continuation of colonial conflicts as, by the way, recruitment heavily depended on colonial politics and perceptions of the pre-war years. British and French authorities, tried to win the support of local societies by making promises about a peace dividend. Coercion, however, remained the main approach to muster manpower in the colonies for the war.

For empires, the war had many contradictory consequences. While the Ottomans, the Habsburg and the Hohenzollern lost their empires, the French and British (as well as the Belgians, who are not dealt with in the volume) extended and rediscovered their empires as a resource and tool of geopolitics. To some extent it brought the end of the lethargy of colonial rule. The interwar years saw a much stronger investment into colonial projects and much more interest in colonial politics, notably in France. During the war, the US (as the British and the French did in Africa) experimented with new forms of colonial policing which, when they proved successful, were transferred from the Philippines to other places. The case of the US (in the chapter by Christopher Capozzola), however, illustrates that the war was the beginning of the end of imperial world order of the long 19th century. The American president Woodrow Wilson became a major voice of criticism of the imperial order stepped into the global arena. His ideas of a post-war order offered to nationalist aspirations new hopes all over the world. Imperialism, however, was still a major frame for geopolitics. The British, still the dominant power in world affairs, avoided at Versailles a decolonization of the global order outside of Europe. But the fabric of empire itself suffered major cracks. In India, the British lost what Stephen Garton calls the „imperial harmony“, the compromise between local elites and British colonial rulers and even in the dominions the war fostered the way towards more autonomy from London.

In his article on the Japanese empire, Frederick R. Dickinson offers an interesting resume of the outcome of war. A major winner of the war was indeed the Japanese Empire, which not only extended its influence of

China, but also made its entry into world politics as a world power by its military success and might. Overall, the First World War inaugurated the end of the European century and the shift of the epicenter of global affairs towards Asia. For China, as Xu Guoqi notes, the outcome of Versailles was a bitter disappointment. Chinese politicians had hoped that their support for the Allied cause would pay off with territorial gains from Germany and Western support for its national awakening. Disappointed, many Chinese intellectuals responded with a renunciation of Western models of modernization. With the Bolsheviks, who established much of the former Tsarist Empire in Asia, a new model for empire-building emerged, which found increasingly attraction among the Chinese.

„Empire at war“ is global history at its best. It offers fresh perspectives on established histories and opens the way for tons of comparisons. Perhaps for the first time in the historiography of the First World War the global dimensions of this conflict are addressed in such a meaningful and comprehensive way.

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