

### **Imperial Legacies: The Afterlife of Multi-Ethnic Empires in the Twentieth Century**

**Veranstalter:** Ulrike von Hirschhausen, Hamburg; Jörn Leonhard, Freiburg; Benedikt Stuchtey, London

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**Bericht von:** Jost Achenbach / Helen Schmitt, Universität Hamburg

All empires generate their own legacies. The dissolution of Europe's continental empires at the end of the First World War, the British and French re-orientation regarding their maritime empires and finally the process of decolonization after 1945 did not simply mark the end of imperial experiences. The many successor states which emerged from the Tsarist Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire after 1918, and the post-colonial societies since the 1950s were confronted with many political and social models as well as cultural paradigms from the imperial past.

Shifting the focus from the empires' seemingly inevitable decline to an analysis of integrative and disintegrative elements of imperial rule and their long-term consequences was the aim of the conference „Imperial Legacies: The Afterlife of Multi-Ethnic Empires in the Twentieth Century“, held from 14th to 16th of September 2008 and organized by Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Hamburg), Jörg Leonhard (Freiburg) and Benedikt Stuchtey (London). The conference was hosted generously by the German Historical Institute London whose director, Andreas Gestrich, opened the first of three sections with a warm welcome.

In the first section, „Alliances, Spheres of Interest, Conflict Strategies: The Legacy of Multi-Ethnic Empires in 20th-Century International Relations“, JOHN SWANSON (Syracuse) questioned the hypothesis that there had been strong lines of continuity between foreign political positions of the Habsburg Empire and her successor states Austria and Hungary. Whereas Austrian foreign policy was dominated by attempts to achieve a *Anschluss* to Germany, the Hungarian diplomacy concentrated on winning back the territories lost after 1918. GUIDO HAUSMANN

(Dublin) looked at the commemoration of the Battles of Poltava 1709 and Borodino in 1812 and stressed the trauma of both invasions as an influential legacy after the Second World War. In contrast to the Tsarist regime which had emphasized the Russian-national dimension of these battles, the Soviet Union accentuated their supranational dimension. The distinct „reservoirs of meaning“ thus pointed to very particular ways of dealing with imperial legacies. JÖRN LEONHARD (Freiburg) contrasted French and British experiences of decolonisation after 1945. The use of the Commonwealth and *Francophonie* became part of the imperial legacy in international politics, helping both countries to position themselves prominently in an era of shifting international status and to cope with the impact of decolonisation on their geopolitical interests abroad. BENEDIKT STUCHEY (London) concluded that attempts to come to terms with decolonisation had been focused on social elites and institutions in the post-colonial world, whereas consequences in metropolitan societies like mixed marriages or racism have not been covered by research sufficiently. Looking at the long-term impacts of racism „at home“, he suggested replacing a mere top-down approach by a bottom-up perspective. He asked how big the moral issues of imperialism were, how strong the heritage of colonial concepts such as the „civilising mission“ prevailed, and to what extent the immigrants in Europe served as living reminders of the former overseas enterprises. With immigration, Stuchtey argued, the colonial frontier came back to England and soon concepts such as Britishness and Englishness were challenged.

The discussion of the first section concentrated on the complex question of continuities and discontinuities between the empires and their respective successor states. Leonhard argued in favour of overcoming this rather narrow perspective in order to look at long-term legacies with regard to particular policies. Stuchtey pointed to the differences in context between political discontinuities and social continuities and particularly the dynamism of the latter. STEPHEN HOWE (Bristol) argued that the significance of the Commonwealth was not only negative. For smaller member states the Commonwealth had a

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growing and positive meaning as a forum in international relations, both economically and politically. In contrast British politicians from the 1970s looked at it with more scepticism, and feared that it could be used by many African and Asian members to restrict the British freedom of foreign political action.

The following keynote by DIETMAR ROTHERMUND (Heidelberg) delved into the comparison of post-imperial states' confrontation with their imperial past. Special attention was paid to the conditions for the acquisition of citizenship and the reactions to migration. Next to European countries like France, Great Britain and the Netherlands was Japan a non-European case for comparison. It became clear how influential the experience of decolonisation and its consequences were for the national profile even if in very different ways everywhere. In all cases though appeared to slowly emerge a common and mounting interest in the colonial pasts.

The second section „Representation and Leadership – The Afterlife of Empire in Political Cultures“ compared the long-time effects of empires on the political cultures of its successor states. How varied this handling of domestic legacies in the case of the Habsburg Monarchy proved to be was shown by STEVEN BELLER (Washington) in his comparison of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Austria. While the multinational Czechoslovak state rejected any reference to the supranational bureaucracy and legislation structures of the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungary referred strongly to its pre-1918 role. Austria, however, after its unsuccessful wish for merging with Germany had to deal with violent internal conflicts opting for either a national or an imperial identity. The construction of an anti-imperialist soviet empire was MALTE ROLF's (Hannover) subject, taking national sport parades as an example. He described the tensions between stressing national diversity in the Soviet Union on the one hand and enforcing a coherent soviet culture on the other. MICHAEL MEEKER (San Diego) showed how in Turkey the social profile of the power networks implementing centre-decisions in the provinces after 1918 remained fairly the same as before and explained this legacy with the Young Turk Revolution to have been only a political

one, not a social one leaving the old elites basically intact. Finally, STEPHEN HOWE (Bristol) argued that the deployment of British soldiers in international conflict zones turned the shared experience of being killed on a post-imperial battlefield into a rediscovered imperial legacy. This, he concluded, was a prime example of how long rooted imperial traditions might create new ones.

In the following discussion Ulrike von Hirschhausen pleaded to scrutinize the traditional, one-directional view on the relation of core and periphery for its validity. Core and periphery, Stuchtey added, were two competing discourses to the extent that the colonized people were not only victims but also collaborators within the imperial framework. ULRIKE FREITAG (Berlin) introduced the term of the „imperial toolkit“ which was frequently made use of in the following discussion. This posed the question if there were symbols and techniques of rule common to both maritime and continental empires and to what extent such „toolkit“ was used by the successor states.

Section III of the conference was dedicated to the ambivalences in „dealing with multiple pasts“ in historiography and the educational systems of the successor states. BENJAMIN FORTNA (London) described the Turkish Republic's rhetoric of rupture with the imperial past making iconography and school books his example. The Turkish attempt of rewriting the political subtext of shared cultural items into supporting a national, secular and modernizing state system led to the outbreak of previously defused conflicts. Similar, yet on a smaller scale, RAINER LINDNER's (Berlin) paper dealt with institutional, personal and ideological continuities obstructing the implementation of a historical narrative justifying soviet rule in Russia. Only at the end of Stalin's reign, patriotism had become a troubled paradigm to control historians of tsarist education in order to forge a passably coherent narrative of pro-soviet history. ULRIKE VON HIRSCHHAUSEN asked what views of the imperial past became dominant in post-war Hungary after 1918 and 1945. Hungary stood out as one of the few successor states which for obvious political reasons produced narratives of nostalgia for the Dual-

Monarchy. Interpreting the large, multi-ethnic state's past as a „successful multi-ethnic existence in the Hungarian crown lands“ served the purpose of supporting the reduced nation's goal of gaining the lost territories back in the post-war presence. RICHARD DRAYTON's (CAMBRIDGE) polemic retelling the story of Great Britain's hegemonic historians' work on the British empire in the late 19th and 20th century rubbed salt into the wounds of historians not dedicated to this narrative as being continuously ignored by the British public. Pointing to the interrelation of strong public interest in certain historical narratives and imperial traditions still shaping the course of foreign policies, Drayton's paper reconstructed the transformed, but apparently unbroken vision of a „Mission of Britain“ supported by a reactionary political history. XOSÉ-MANOEL NÚÑEZ (Santiago de Compostela) introduced the Spanish tradition of imperial historiography characterized by two competing narratives mainly of conservative-catholic or liberal origin and their elaboration of American, Pacific and North-African colonial projects.

In the succeeding discussion Leonhard pointed to the often implicit, unintended continuities in the presented historiographical, post-imperial projects and the possible challenges stemming from the reservoir of meaning all these politics of history had to come to terms with. The example of the Hungarian historiography supported a more general musement about the validity of the core-periphery model for historical explanations of the simultaneous emergence of nostalgia for and the general discredit of imperial orders at the same time. Summing up the argument, Hirschhausen considered the core-periphery dichotomy as a highly valuable pattern of analysing empires during their existence, but as hardly helpful for post-imperial constellations. With regard to the Spanish and the British case, CATHERINE HALL (London) observed the lasting significance of the hegemonic historiography in regard to domestic and geopolitical as well as social questions. She convincingly related the apologetic program of this historiography as being ignorant and obtrusive to new historical questions of political significance, foremost gender and post-

colonial studies. Only the emergence of immigrant communities in the former metropolises and the global revolution of gender roles had introduced significant new actors to the resulting politics of history and institutions of historical research.

At Tuesday's closing panel discussion, panellists Michael Meeker, Ulrike Freitag, ANDREW THOMPSON (Leeds), ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin), Steven Beller and Dietmar Rothermund and the conference participant's subsequent commentaries invoked the lasting significance of imperial legacies on many different levels not only to historians but also to present political challenges: Relating the „soft“ methods of the imperial toolkit for the creation of systemic support to their „hard“ military and economic conditions would be more productive, Freitag and Meeker argued, when taking fields of social practices and gender studies into consideration.

Thompson and Eckert acknowledged the advantages of a comparative approach yet criticized that previously discussed concepts of „longue durée“ and „layers of meaning“ because of their complexity had not sufficiently been incorporated into the conference's papers and discussions. Beller and Rothermund stressed the importance of meta-approaches which allowed reevaluating more traditional dimensions of comparison such as continental and maritime, settler vs. non-settler, formal vs. informal empires. Stuchtey concluded that not only the imperialisms, but also the anti-imperialisms of the colonial societies under review were important and difficult to compare, as it meant to bridge the gap between the different historiographical cultures. Mentioning the long continuity of colonial criticism he pointed to the fact that less the empires themselves but rather their modes of imperialism were contested. Who were the interpreters of imperial legacies: the historians, the general public, who else? By reconnecting basic ideas of the European integration process to Europe's historical experiences with imperial rule and compromise, outreach and decolonisation, the panellists made a powerful point about the pressing reality of upholding privileged positions in the international economic and political system dating from imperial times.

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In his farewell words Leonhard expressed his gratitude to the German Historical Institute London for hosting the conference, the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for financial support, and to the conference participants for their de-centring and inspiring input: comparative history, he concluded, especially when looking at perceptions of empire and imperial legacies in peripheries lead to a multiplication of study units which made the subject far too complex to describe it in a narrow „continuities vs. discontinuities“ framework, pledging for a longue durée perspective reflecting the layers of imperial legacies. The most promising „inroads“ to imperial studies and its legacies seemed at this conference to be questions of agency, social practices, and their relation to the past as a reservoir of meaning.

Special thanks go to Tom Neuhaus who successfully took care of all the conference participants needs and provided for a very comfortable frame during these three days.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### Welcome and Introduction

Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Hamburg), Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg), Benedikt Stuchtey (London): Imperial Legacies and the 20th Century

Section I: Alliances, Spheres of Interest, Conflict Strategies: The Legacy of Multi-Ethnic in Empires in 20th Century International Relations (Soviet Russia, Habsburg Monarchy's successor states, Turkey)

John C. Swanson (Syracuse): From Empire to Nation State: Foreign Political Continuities in the 1920s and 1930s – The case of Austria and Hungary

Guido Hausmann (Dublin): A new Empire? The Soviet Union's Position in International Politics after 1917

Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg): Decolonization and after: The Foreign Political Re-orientation of France and Britain since 1945

Benedikt Stuchtey (London): Decolonization: The British Experience and the Commonwealth

Moderation and Comment: Robert Evans (Oxford)

Key-Note Lecture

Dietmar Rothermund (Heidelberg) Nations of Empire? – The Legacy of Empires in 20th Century Europe

Section II: Representation and Leadership — The Afterlife of Empire in Political Cultures (Soviet Russia, Habsburg Monarchy's successor states, Turkey, Britain)

Steven Beller (Washington/DC): Representation and Authority in the Political Cultures of Hungary and Czechoslovakia after 1918

Malte Rolf (Hannover): Replicating Imperialist Relations from within? Soviet strategies of Empowering the Center against the Republics in the 1920s and 1930s

Michael Meeker (San Diego): Regional Oligarchies and Family Networks as Means of Imperial Rule in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic

Stephen Howe (Bristol): The British Empire's legacy on Britain's Political Culture

Moderation and Comment: Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Hamburg)

Section III: Dealing with multiple Pasts — Empire-Historiographies and Education (Soviet Russia, Habsburg Monarchy's successor states, Turkey)

Benjamin Fortna (London): Icons of Kemalism? The Imperial Past from Ottoman Classrooms to Turkish School

Rainer Lindner (Berlin): Between Distancing and Imitating - Imperial Patterns in Soviet Historiography in the 1920s and 1930s

Ulrike v. Hirschhausen (Hamburg): Revisiting the imperial past: The view of Habsburg's Rule in 20th century Hungary

Moderation and Comment: Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg)

Section III (cont.): Dealing with multiple Pasts — Empire-Historiographies and Education (Britain, Spain)

Richard Drayton (Cambridge): The Historiographical Afterlife of British Imperialism

Xose-Manuel Nunes-Seixas (Coruna): Dealing with Decline? The Spanish Empire in Spanish Historiography and Education

Moderation and Comment: Catherine Hall  
(London)

Panel Discussion: Imperial Legacies in the  
Modern World

After Empire – Before Empire?

Andrew Thompson (Leeds), Andreas Eckert  
(Berlin), Dietmar Rothermund (Heidelberg),  
Catherine Hall (London), Ulrike Freytag (Ber-  
lin), Steven Beller (Washington)

Moderation: Benedikt Stuchtey (London)

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