

## **Empires after the First World War: Ideas of Empire, Identity and Citizenship**

**Veranstalter:** Gustavo Corni / Sara Lorenzini, University of Trento

**Datum, Ort:** 19.05.2016–20.05.2016, Trient

**Bericht von:** Giovanni Costenaro, Department of History, University of Trento

How crises have triggered specific historical processes has become a primary topic in recent historiography, especially on European and global history. Joining these interests, the international conference „Empires after the First World War: Ideas of Empire, Identity and Citizenship“ held at the University of Trento from 19 to 20 May 2016, addressed how the First World War influenced and changed ideas of empire, citizenship and identity in the major empires involved in the war. Focusing on the dynamics between subjecthood, citizenship, imperial and national identities, as well as national and transnational interests, the symposium adopted a comparative perspective that is particularly useful to understand the global interactions that took place between the different realities examined – as well as the local processes of construction and deconstruction of identities and citizenships. Various scholars underlined the relationship between the national *fulcrum* of the empires and their multi-ethnic peripheries. In this matter, it emerged how the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion of minorities in a common imperial frame influenced the evolution of imperial ideas and governance after the war. In fact, the failure to include minorities in a common discourse of imperial identity undermined the war effort of some powers as well as their stability after the war.

This was especially clear in two cases: first in the Habsburg empire, where the treatment of the war refugees by central authorities (and by the population of Austria, Bohemia and Moravia) undermined the idea of a multi-ethnic state community – see FRANCESCO FRIZZERA's (Trento) paper –, and second in the Ottoman empire, in which a failed inclusion of the Arab communities into war discourses and efforts contributed to the fall of the empire – see EUGENE ROGAN's (Oxford) last book on the war in the Middle

East. Interestingly, Frizzera explained how Austro-Hungarian refugees, even if citizens of the Empire, were often expelled from the territories in which they had fled, and that central authorities were not able to ensure them subsistence and minimum rights. Rogan, for his part, made an interesting observation deeply related to cultural history. Suggesting that Arab countries were less motivated to fight during the war, he underlined how in Arab countries the presence of memorials built in the aftermath of the war are rare and sporadic, especially if compared with Europe. However, the war affected the governance of the victorious powers too. As DANIEL GORMAN's (Waterloo, Canada) paper on English empire has shown, the war brought the different imperial ideas and identities that had existed before the conflict into a single frame. At the same time, it exacerbated anti-colonial nationalism, especially after the Wilsonian moment. In the Dominions, the war effort resulted in a form of hybrid Identity („Empire nationalism“) that intermixed national pride, race patriotism and imperial loyalties. In the colonies, imperial cohesion was undermined, also because Britain wasn't able to deal with questions of imperial citizenship within a unified field of vision. In the end, the war had a corrosive impact on imperial legitimacy, and one of its main political results was to strengthen the Dominions' and India's claim to international status. DÓNAL HASSET (Florence), studying colonial reforms in Algeria, argues that most of the citizens and subjects demanding a new governance in Algeria did not intend to exit the empire but, instead, to reconfigure it in a more pluralist way. Indigenous and settlers tried to renegotiate their position within the empire, and even if these demands were substantially ignored by the metropolitan government, they show how citizens and subjects of the colonies viewed their role in the evolving empire. Studies focused on those countries that radically changed their regimes after the war (Italy and Russia) registered a parallel deep change in the government's attitude towards imperial subjects and citizens. Regarding the Italian case, according to SABINA DONATI (Pully, Switzerland) the war had an enormous impact in reshaping imperial iden-

---

tities and ideas because it contributed to the rise of fascism. Considering that citizenship and subjecthood at the time were flexible concepts, Donati noticed that they were used to expand fascist revolution to the peripheries and to support Mussolini's desire for new lands (i.e. the Libyan citizenship system). In this matter racial thinking, discussions, and gender considerations deeply influenced imperial settings and fascist attitudes toward the colonized. If Sabina Donati underlined the hiatus between liberal and fascist governance, FEDERICO CRESTI (Catania), studying the case of the Italian policies towards its Libyan territories, pointed out that the war opened new spaces for self-determination in the colonies. In 1919-20, after the Wilsonian moment, the Italian ministry of colonies was afraid that Turkey could call into question the future status of Libya. For this reason, and to avoid the errors that had resulted in a substantial reduction in Italian control of Libyan territories, central authorities decided to reconsider their colonial policies. When G. Colosimo was minister of the colonies, Italy tried to involve Libyan tribes of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in a new form of indirect rule (*statuti libici*) that gave them large spaces of autonomy and self-government, as well as parliaments based on tribal divisions. Senussi, for their part, gained a substantial independency, recognizing in the meantime the Italian rule over Cyrenaica. However, this lasted only for a brief period, after which Italy started a new war to conquer all the Libyan territories. Russia, for its part, was of course another empire that drastically changed its form of government as a consequence of the First World War. ALEXEY MILLER (Saint Petersburg) presented his paper on the changes in Russian identities from 1913 to 1922: He considered the war as a key moment for the end of Monarchy. Distancing himself from historians who judge that the First World War became just the last push which brought the Empire to its end, he argued that it played a decisive role in this sense. Although serious, the imperial crisis was in fact resolvable by central authorities, at least until the defeats of the Russian armies in 1915. Concerning the topic of identities, in his opinion until the revolution Russian nationalism

(that depicted Russia as a triune nation) was growing in strength also in the peripheries of the empire (Ukraine and Belarus). However, once they had come to power, Bolsheviks destroyed the social strata, which was mostly associated with Russian nationalism and imperialism and promoted Ukrainian and Belarusian identities, rejecting the concept of a triune nation. Consequently, in this matter, Miller identified a clear rupture between the late Romanov empire and the early Soviet Union.

One of Russia's greatest enemies, Germany, tried during the war to influence identity dynamics in Russia's western peripheries. By the way, at the end of the conflict Germany lost a large part of its former territory, including its African colonies. As FLORIAN WAGNER (Hamburg) showed in his paper, the Allies deprived Germany of its colonies claiming its failure to accomplish the European civilizing mission, by ill-treating the colonial subjects. For this reason, former German colonial governors such as Heinrich Schnee started an international press campaign to defend their work in Africa. In his analysis of these writings, Wagner argued that the international community of colonizing powers was quick to reintegrate Germans into its ranks, to defend the general colonial project that was increasingly menaced by the colonized. Colonial experts began therefore to assess the option of participating in colonial projects of other powers or international organizations. The most famous of these organizations during the interwar period was of course the League of Nations, which in the aftermath of the war established programs providing economic and technical advice to European Countries, in response to their lack of raw materials. Analyzing this topic JAIMIE MARTIN (Cambridge) presented the case of Austria, where the League's financial committee directed a program to solve the country's hyperinflation and to lead to its financial recovery. Managed by a League's „controller“, with large powers over Austria's financial policies, this program represented a new international form of control, based on previous mechanisms of colonial rule. For Martin, the appointment of a foreign official to a western sovereign country, with the power to oversee reforms, decide on distri-

butional questions, and enforce austerity, was necessary to increase the power of the state and to make possible a return to conditions of economic liberalism – in which the state was no longer to play a central role. For these reasons, according to Martin Austria's financial reconstruction represents the real birth of peacetime international economic governance and is an important precedent for the schemes of financial oversight, economic development and technical assistance designed by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. The question of sovereignty – although in a very different way – was central also in the reflections of MUSTAFA AKSAKAL (Washington DC). Studying the constitutions drafted by the first Turkish Assemblies (that of 1921 and 1923, which finally proclaimed the Turkish republic) Aksakal paid attention to the real owner of Turkish sovereignty: the people, represented by the „Grand National Assembly“ (*Büyük Millet Meclisi*). He then noticed that the term *Millet*, translated in English into „National“, in Turkish has a strong religious meaning, referring to the Muslim people of Turkey. Without making any conclusion, Aksakal underlined that the principle of secularism was added only in 1937, and that the 1924 constitution gave great importance to religion and to majority rule, paying only little attention to minorities.

After the discussions opened by the papers the conference was closed ended with a roundtable discussion held by GUSTAVO CORNI (Trento), MARC FREY (München), and MASSIMO CAMPANINI (Trento). They summarized the contents of the various papers and stressed several important dynamics related to questions of citizenship and identity that deeply influenced self-perceptions and self-representations, from the fall of certain empires to the emergence of international actors. An important conclusion was the one according to which immediately after the war, and then between the two world wars, the empires failed in reshaping themselves in front of the new international scenario opened by the First World War. After the Wilsonian moment and the financial-economic crises that at the end of the conflict (and then during the 1930s), posed a threat

to the power of some empires, such empires did not react with policies directed to open new inclusive spaces of participation for their multi-ethnic realities. From a cultural perspective, this contributed probably more than peripheral nationalisms and separatist wills to their crisis and final disintegration after the First and the Second World War (and of course it also increased them).

### Conference Overview:

*First Session: Citizenship and National Identity in the European Empires*

Chair: Gustavo Corni

Alexey Miller (European University at Saint Petersburg), The change of the meaning of Russian identity in official discourse from 1913 to 1922.

Daniel Gorman (University of Waterloo), *Fractured Empire: Ideas of Imperial Citizenship in the British Empire after the First World War*.

Sabina Donati (Pierre du Bois Foundation for Current History), Citizenship, territorial expansionism and empire: the Italian case study.

Francesco Frizzera (Università di Trento), *Shaping Identities: Refugees of the Habsburg*

*Second Session: Identity and Citizenship in the Colonial Empires*

Chair: Sara Lorenzini

Dónal Hassett (European University Institute), *Reimagining Imperial Citizenship in the Shadow of the Great War: Colonial Reform in Algeria*.

Jamie Martin (Harvard University), *Internationalizing Colonial Economic Administration: Debt, Development, and Strategies for Postwar Stabilization at the League of Nations*.

Florian Wagner (University of Hamburg), *The Loss of Colonies as the End of German Civilization? Re-Orientations of German Colonialism in the Interwar Period*.

Federico Cresti (Università di Catania), *Quale futuro per le colonie italiane dopo la fine della Prima guerra mondiale? Dibattito politico, realizzazioni, fallimenti*.

---

*Third Session: Citizenship and Nations in the Middle East*

Chair: Massimo Campanini

Eugene Rogan (University of Oxford), *The Arabs in the Ottoman Great War*.

Mustafa Aksakal (Georgetown University), *The Turkish Republic and the First World War*.

*Roundtable discussion*

Gustavo Corni (Università di Trento) / Massimo Campanini (Università di Trento) / Marc Frey (Universität der Bundeswehr, München)

Tagungsbericht *Empires after the First World War: Ideas of Empire, Identity and Citizenship*. 19.05.2016–20.05.2016, Trient, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.11.2016.