Maurus Reinkowski
Gregor Thum (Eds.)

Helpless Imperialists

Imperial Failure, Fear
and Radicalization

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

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Helpless Imperialists: Introduction

A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.

George Orwell, 1936

The figure of the "helpless imperialist" is a provocation. After all, empires stand for power and superiority. Their economic, technological, and military superiority vis-à-vis the people they subjugate needs to be overwhelming. In theory at least, their governments should be able to transport soldiers and heavy arms wherever and whenever necessary to assert their power, claim territory, and quell any form of resistance in either the colonies or on the frontiers of their continental realms. Again and again, empires have not only proved their technological capability, but also their readiness to slaughter, by the thousands and tens of thousands, those who oppose their rule.[1]

Ruthlessness in the use of force did not, of course, prevent the empires' eventual decline, which culminated in the second half of the twentieth century with the decolonization process. Yet the empires' successor states often continued to dominate large areas of the planet, albeit in different forms and by drawing on different strategies to legitimize their persistent influence.[2] In addition, the new superpowers of the second half of the twentieth century, the United States and the Soviet Union, inaugurated new forms of imperial rule, despite their anticolonial self-image.[3] Against this backdrop, nine-

1 Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide. Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York, 2008); idem/Dan Stone (eds.), *Colonialism and Genocide* (London, 2008); Thoralf Klein/Frank Schumacher (eds.), *Kolonialkriege. Militärische Gewalt im Zeichen des Imperialismus* (Hamburg, 2006).

2 See, for instance, Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford, 2006).

3 Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945. From "Empire" by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford, 2005); Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires. Ameri-*

teenth- and twentieth-century imperialism looks to us like a remarkably stable, effective, and flexible system of rule. Even in situations of crisis, empires were usually far from helpless.

1. Imperial Failure

Nonetheless, the feeling of "helplessness" was a significant part of the imperial experience. Not only was an empire's superior strength oftentimes doubtful. The perception of their strength vs. weakness was defined not only by their day-to-day success, but also by the scope of their long-term imperial ambitions. These ambitions, however, were virtually limitless. Empires attempted to control vast overseas territories, far larger and more populous than their metropolises; they pushed forward their frontiers into distant and unknown territory and established imperial outposts in inhospitable environments. They stretched their supply lines to the utmost and often had to leave their imperial advance guards to fend for themselves. The representatives of empire had to establish their rule over indigenous populations that not only by far outnumbered the colonizers, but were also familiar with the land and local conditions. Superior firepower carried only so far when the survival of the imperial outposts and their personnel required, at least to some extent, the cooperation and support of the indigenous population.

Overreach, a consequence of overambition, was the rule rather than the exception in the history of empires. A disconnect between goals and means, between ambitions and capabilities, was as much a mark of imperialism as superiority based upon armadas of ships, well-trained and well-equipped armies, and battalions of skilled scholars, businessmen, officers, and administrators. As well-trained and well-equipped the bearers of imperial rule may have been, they nonetheless found themselves, more often than not, in fragile positions of power. The classical colonial situation consisted of a tiny minority of colonizers adrift in hostile and incomprehensible surroundings. Long before decolonization and the decline of the empires began, the "islands of white"[4] were positions of vulnerability rather than strength.

Advanced technology and superior military strength could often compensate for asymmetry in numbers. It was much harder, however, to overcome the lack of knowledge about the colonized that led to difficulties in

can Ascendancy and Its Predecessors (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Herfried Münkler, Empires. The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States (Cambridge, 2007); Terry Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

  4 Dane Kennedy, Islands of White. Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1939 (Durham, NC, 1987).

interpreting and predicting their behavior and assessing the degree of their loyalty or hostility. Such ignorance was fertile ground for exaggerated fears and conspiracy theories.[5] A fascination with the exotic was part of the attraction of the imperial experience, but it had a dark side in the fear of the unknown.

The sense of fragility and insecurity that so often characterized the colonies and the frontiers of continental empires was not merely a temporary phenomenon that followed immediately on the conquest of new land. Though one might expect colonizers' growing familiarity with an initially alien environment to stabilize imperial rule, in fact it was not only the colonizers, but also the colonized who adapted to the new situation. And as the empires' representatives came to better understand local conditions, so too did the subjugated people learn to deal more effectively with their colonial rulers. The bearers of imperial rule soon faced the rise of political movements that undermined the legitimacy of imperial rule by turning the political and ethical values of the metropolises against the latter's rule.[6]

The resistance of the people subjugated to imperial rule was only one factor contributing to the perceived fragility of imperial power. Domestic public opinion was also critical. No imperial project could be pursued successfully without the backing of the metropole's politicians, journalists, travel writers, scholars, public intellectuals, and other opinion leaders. Unlike the creation of empires in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, the undertakings of modern imperialism were observed and discussed in the daily press. They had to find approval in parliamentary debates, at party conventions, and in the other forums that shaped public opinion. It was no longer sufficient for a handful of entrepreneurs to believe in the value of their imperial projects. The metropole had to be convinced that the empire was using its financial means and instruments of power wisely and for the benefit of a just cause.

The idea of the civilizing mission was, historically, a powerful tool for the creation of popular support in the metropole. Imperial nations simply felt entitled to rule over others, to exploit the labor and natural resources of distant territories, and to demonstrate their cultural superiority by educating the world's "savages." With the spread of the mass media in the nineteenth

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5 Kim Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857. Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Oxford, 2010); for the impact of conspiracy theories on occupation policy during the First World War, see Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between. Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (Oxford, 2010), 41–70.

6 See, for instance, Frederick Cooper, The Senegalese General Strike of 1946 and the Labor Question in Post-War French Africa, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 24 (1990), 165–215; idem, "Our Strike": Equality, Anticolonial Politics, and the French West African Railway Strike of 1947–48, *Journal of African History* 37 (1996), 81–118.

century, however, the support for such imperial "benefactions" became more volatile. It could disappear overnight when news reached the metropole of overly brutal punitive actions resulting in death and destruction and could no longer be reconciled with the notion of a "civilizing mission." Thus imperial rule was sometimes more threatened by the shift in public opinion that the suppression of a rebellion could cause in the metropole than by the rebellion itself.

British imperialists had all the logistical and military means to prevail during the Boer War by forcing large parts of the civilian population into concentration camps, thereby cutting off the Boers from their support in the country. When the British public learned of the horrific death rates among the concentration camp inmates, however, the entire project was quickly discredited: The British later lost their South African colony not through military defeat but through the force of public disapproval at home. In England, ever fewer people believed in the moral legitimacy of British colonial rule.[7] By the same token, while the brutal suppression of the Boxer uprising in China by German expeditionary troops in 1900 did quell the rebellion, the public outcry in Germany over the conduct of German troops, whose actions could not be reconciled with the idea of a German civilizing mission, rendered the military operation a political defeat.[8] In such cases the agents of imperialism likely felt that they were conducting a two-front war – against the resistance of the colonized and the shifting mood of domestic public opinion. Seen from this perspective, their situation might well have been more "helpless" than the number of guns at their disposal suggested.

A third factor undermining the imperialists' self-confidence was widespread doubt as to whether the empires' agents – the men and women on the spot in the colonies or the outposts on the frontier – could meet the physical and moral challenges they faced. The long-term effects of an unhealthy climate, the dangers posed by unfamiliar fauna and flora, and the risk of tropical diseases were hardships enough, but there was worry as well over how the agents of empire would cope with the "moral dangers" they encountered. A primary concern was the risk of Europeans "going native" through assimilation or miscegenation instead of guarding the ethnic or racial barriers between the colonizers and the colonized. Even those who managed to keep

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7 Iain R. Smith/Andreas Stucki, The Colonial Development of Concentration Camps (1868–1902), *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39 (2011) 3, 419–39.

8 Thoralf Klein, Insecurities of Imperialism: The Siege of Bejing and Its Aftermath in the 'Western' Press, Summer 1900 (Paper given at the conference "Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Radicalization, and Violence between High Imperialism and Decolonization", Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies, January 2010); Thoralf Klein, Strafexpedition im Namen der Zivilisation. Der "Boxerkrieg" in China (1900–1901), in: Klein/Schumacher (eds.), Kolonialkriege, 145–81.

these barriers in place were thought to be threatened by moral decline on ac-count of their daily interaction with the "barbarian." It was not easy uphold-ing the standards of civilization in the wild, to say nothing of actually carry-ing out the empires' civilizing mission. Fear that imperial agents might instead experience a kind of "reverse colonization," regressing from civili-zation into barbarism, from good to evil, was common. This fear found fa-mous literary expression in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. All the tech-nological and military superiority of the empires as well as their advanced civilization were of no avail if their representatives proved unable to main-tain the alleged moral superiority of their civilizations. In Conrad's story, it was not the external enemy but rather internal weakness that rendered the imperialists inept at meeting the great challenges of their self-assigned mission.

Imperial failure thus can be defined as the incapacity to overcome the political and military resistance of the colonized, to maintain the support of public opinion for imperial projects even in moments of crisis, and, on a more individual basis, the imperial agents' inability to meet the moral and physical challenges of imperial rule.

2. Fear

The Colonizers' recognition of the large gap separating assumed imperial capacities and the realities on the ground fed their feeling of vulnerability. It might in fact be said that "helplessness" was really nothing but the *fear* of helplessness should imperial rule be put to the test. Anxieties, particularly in moments of crisis, have played an important role in the imperialist mindset, reflecting supposed dangers and threats, not necessarily real ones. It is the *perception* of a threat, not the threat itself, that influences political action. Imperial rule on the periphery was often far *less* vulnerable than it appeared to the empires' representatives. The stakes, however, were high. Wherever imperial agents failed to carry out their mission, they not only undermined their empire's standing, but also threatened their own social status vis-à-vis the colonized. As we know from Joanna Bourke's cultural history of fear, hu-mans are better at overcoming even the fear of dying in combat than the fear of losing their social status.[9] And the politics of empire are to a large de-gree driven by concerns regarding a nation's status among other (imperial) nations, its "international prestige," as Max Weber put it. The social status of the agents of empire vis-à-vis their subjects and the representatives of other empires derives directly from – and depends on – this prestige. Hence, im-

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9 Joanna Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History* (Emeryville, CA, 2006), 27–28.

perial agents easily equate their own social status with the prestige of the empire they represent.

As Birthe Kundrus has pointed out with respect to the "mental cohort" of German colonialism: "Their goal was a real and symbolic gain of status, their greatest fear the loss of status."[10] An awareness that they lacked the resources to project power to the degree deemed necessary to defend the empire's fragile position on the imperial frontiers in moments of crisis translated easily into a fear of total failure. Around 1900, in Germany's deeply militarized society, the gap between the country's grand imperial goals and its lack of experience and preparation in exercising (military) power in the colonies was particularly wide.[11] Delusions of German grandeur and doubts about whether others took the young empire seriously made "the fear of appearing weak become the fear of being weak."[12] From here it was only a small step to overcompensation and an excessively brutal – genocidal – suppression of rebellions, such as the Herero and Maji Maji uprisings in German Southwest and German East Africa between 1904 and 1907.

Following the hints of Hannah Arendt, in recent years scholars have intensely studied German colonialism in search of possible links between overseas colonialism and the genocidal policy of Nazi Germany during the Second World War.[13] It is worth asking, however, to what degree the German case sheds light on general patterns of imperial rule rather than on the aberrations of a particular nation or a peculiar imperial formation such as the continental empire.[14] In moments of crisis, all empires tended to dismiss the norms of civilization in order to secure their borderlands and colonies

10 Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten. Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Vienna, 2003), 282.

11 Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), 137

12 Ibid., 178.

13 Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire. German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (New York, 2010); David Furber, Near as Far in the Colonies: The Nazi Occupation of Poland, *International Historical Review* 26 (2004) 3, 541–79; Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. How the Nazis Ruled the World* (New York, 2008); Jürgen Zimmerer, The Birth of the Ostland out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination, *Patterns of Prejudice* 39 (2005) 2, 197–219. See also, Volker Langbehn/Mohammad Salama (eds.), *German Colonialism. Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany* (New York, 2011).

14 Robert Gerwarth/Stephan Malinowski, Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz, *Central European History* 42 (2009), 279–300; Birthe Kundrus, Continuities, Parallels, Receptions: Reflections on the "Colonization" of National Socialism, *Journal of Namibia Studies* 1 (2008) 4, 25–46; for a close reading of what Arendt really said, see A. Dirk Moses, Hannah Arendt, Imperialism, and the Holocaust, in: Langbehn/Salama (eds.), German Colonialism, 72–92.

against rebellions and secessions, no matter how much these very norms might have been cherished in the metropole.[15]

Regardless of how reckless, brutal, and murderous the countermeasures against real, perceived, and potential rebellions in the imperial peripheries were, we cannot fully understand the imperial mindset and the history of empires without taking into account that the agents of imperial rule most often understood their countermeasures as legitimized acts of self-defense. Their fear of failing in this defense could lead to the perception that they were dangerously weak, far in excess of the real situation, and this in turn could translate into a tendency to overcompensate through – potentially violent – demonstrations of power.

By focusing on scenarios of threat and introducing the metaphor of the "helpless imperialist," we have no intention of excusing the suppression of allegedly disloyal populations or the brutality of colonial warfare. Our interest, rather, is to come to a better understanding of how empires and their agents reacted in moments of crisis, when the widening gap between goals and resources seemed to jeopardize their imperial projects. Also, we are aware that scenarios of threat cannot be taken at face value. In many cases, the agents of empire deliberately exaggerated or fabricated those threats to justify the radicalization of their politics and their departure from hitherto respected norms of conduct.

3. Radicalization

Recourse to violence was not the only way in which empires tried to strengthen their grip on their holdings in times of crisis. A variety of political strategies were also employed. These included grand efforts to display imperial power and superiority through military parades and state ceremonies, the erection of imposing governmental buildings and imperial monuments, and bringing to the colonies and borderlands such never-before-seen technical marvels as railroad stations and cast-iron bridges. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the rise of the national movements became a particularly serious challenge for the multiethnic empires, efforts were also made to strengthen the emotional bonds between the empire and its subjects. It was at this time that Queen Victoria took the title of Empress of India, when Emperor Francis Joseph embarked on triumphant inspection

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15 Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge, 2005); A. Dirk Moses, Besatzung, Kolonialherrschaft und Widerstand: Das Völkerrecht und die Legitimierung von Terror, Peripherie. *Zeitschrift für Politik und Ökonomie in der Dritten Welt* 116 (2009), 399–424.

tours to the peripheries of the Habsburg monarchy, and when Nikolai II posed in a variety of the ethnic costumes of the vast Russian Empire. Facing calls for national autonomy and independence, monarchs tried to square the circle by simultaneously displaying imperial dignity and a closeness to their subjects in even the remotest of their territorial possessions.[16]

Public displays of respect for an empire's ethnic and national diversity did not mean that its imperial governments would not at the same time intensify the surveillance and suppression of national movements. Here the otherwise quite similar politics of maritime and continental empires show a marked divergence. While the governments and metropole societies of maritime empires instituted stricter legal segregation of the races, thus defending discrimination against the native inhabitants of the colonies, the continental empires embarked on a policy of enforced integration of the borderlands. In particular in empires like Russia, Imperial Germany, and the Kingdom of Hungary, where the state-bearing nation occupied a numerically dominant position within the overall population, governments were tempted to enforce the use of the metropole's language in the borderlands and to promote the metropole's national culture so as to assimilate ethnically distinct populations. Part of this homogenization policy was the suppression of religious denominations that were suspected of supporting potentially secessionist movements in the borderlands. At the same, the governments privileged loyalist religious institutions, such as Russian Orthodoxy in Russia, Roman Catholicism in Austria-Hungary, and Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire.[17]

During the period under consideration, attempts to integrate – or "nationalize" – the borderlands linguistically and culturally, usually promoted by imperialist and nationalist organizations in the metropole, hardly ever yielded tangible successes. They tended, on the contrary, to strengthen centrifugal forces rather than weaken them. The logical next step of radicalization was the move from the nationalization of people to the nationalization of the

16 See the chapter, Monarchie als Ritual: Imperiale Inszenierung und Repräsentationen, in: Jörn Leonhard/Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten* (Göttingen, 2009); Daniel Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism. Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette, IN, 2005).

17 See, for instance, Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians. The Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam, 2007); Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb, IL, 1996); Richard Blanke, *Prussian Poland in the German Empire, 1871–1900* (Boulder, 1981); Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London, 1998); Masami Arai, *Turkish Nationalism in the Young Turk Era* (Leiden, 1992).

soil. An active resettlement policy, it was supposed, would alter the ethnic composition of the borderlands by increasing the population percentage of the state-bearing nationality. In terms of the planning and implementation of such a reshuffle of peoples, the Settlement Commission for Prussia's Polish borderlands, established in 1886, set new standards.

The modest overall results of the Prussian settlement policy, however, prepared the ground for a further radicalization of the imperial mindset. During the Great War, large-scale deportations of allegedly disloyal populations from the borderlands became, to a greater extent, politically feasible. Particularly in the Ottoman and Russian Empire, where the ruling elites felt that they were fighting with their backs to the wall, ethnic cleansing became widespread practice.[18] It was only a small step from the deportation of "internal enemies" to their liquidation, as the mass murder of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire demonstrated.[19] It is important to note, however, that the nationalization of the borderlands was not a practice limited exclusively to empires. Many of the nation-states that succeeded them engaged in this policy as well, from enforcing the exclusive use of the state language, to implementing ethnically discriminative land reforms, to ethnic cleansing.[20] In this respect, transitions between empires and nation-states were quite seamless.

Was radicalization a logical consequence of the weakness and vulnerability that empires experienced at their frontiers? To assume some automatic connection between fear and political radicalization, between frustration and violence, is as tempting as it is problematic. The Habsburg monarchy can be cited as an example of an imperial government that embarked on a course of moderation and compromise between metropole and periphery after its humiliating defeat in the Austro-Prussian War in 1866. One might

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18 Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire. The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War* I (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Prusin, The Lands Between; Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge, 2011); see also Omer Bartov/Eric D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Ethnicity, Identity, and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN, 2012).

19 Ron G. Suny/Fatma M. Gocek/Norman Naimark (eds.), *A Question of Genocide. Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 2011).

20 Wolfgang Kessler, Die gescheiterte Integration: Die Minderheitenfrage in Ostmitteleuropa, 1918–1939, in: Hans Lemberg (ed.), *Ostmitteleuropa zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen, 1918–1939. Stärke und Schwäche der neuen Staaten, nationale Minderheiten* (Marburg, 1997), 161–88; Wilfried Schlau, Die Agrarreformen und ihre Auswirkungen, in: Ostmitteleuropa zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen, 145–59; Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Philipp Ther, *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten. "Ethnische Säuberungen" im modernen Europa* (Göttingen, 2012).

even argue with Pieter Judson that the monarchy, in particular in the political practices of its Austrian half, simply stopped being an empire and transformed itself into something entirely different.[21]

The assumption that weakness invariably leads to political radicalization would also contradict much of what we know about the radicalization of European military thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the colonies, the imperialists acquired new patterns and mentalities of violence. As the historian Donald Bloxham and his co-authors put it: "The parallel, sometimes joint European penetration of the non-European world led to a continually expanding European colonial archive, to be understood as common knowledge on the treatment, exploitation and extermination of 'sub-humans' accumulated by the European powers of the course of colonial history."[22] It was not that the imperialists became deeply anxious about themselves in the colonies and were thus driven to discharge their anxieties in the European wars of the twentieth century. On the contrary, the colonial experience "bred or reinforced in Europeans a sense of cultural superiority which was shared by the masses as much as by the elites."[23]

Nevertheless – and this is the basic argument of this volume – the feeling of helplessness was neither the one and only nor the dominant imperialist experience, but it was an innate part of imperialist experience in moments of crisis. Without promoting simplistic causal connections, this book raises the question to what degree, and under what circumstances, constellations of perceived weakness were prone to political radicalization and led to a turn toward excessive force on the part of the bearers of imperial rule.

4. Periodization

Many of the observations regarding the structural weakness of imperial power in relation to imperial goals are not time-specific. The Ancient Romans crossing the Alps faced similar problems stemming from their empire's over-extension and overambition, as did the Mongols riding westward, or the Spaniards building their overseas empire in the Americas. What this book

21 Pieter Judson, L'Autriche-Hongrie était-elle un empire?, *Annales. Historie, sciences sociales* 63 (2008), 563–96.

22 Donald Bloxham/Martin Conway/Robert Gerwarth/A. Dirk Moses/Klaus Weinhauer, Europe in the World: Systems and Cultures of Violence, in: Donald Bloxham/Robert Gerwarth (eds.), *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 19.

23 James McMillan, War, in: Bloxham/Gerwarth (eds.), Political Violence, 47. See also Lorenzo Veracini, Colonialism and Genocides: Notes for the Analysis of a Settler Archive, in: Moses (ed.), Empire, Colony, Genocide, 148–61.

offers is not a universal history of imperial failure beginning, say, from the day Darius the Great and his army got lost pursuing the Scythians across the plains of Central Asia in the sixth century BCE to the retreat of the US from its neo-imperial undertaking in Iraq, which continues in the present-day. We consider it useful to limit the temporal scope of our examination to the era between roughly 1880 and 1960, that is between high imperialism and decolonization.

This period was characterized by breathtaking scientific and technological progress, accompanied by comprehensive, but also unsettling modernization in the industrialized regions of the world.[24] It was this very progress that allowed for an exceptionally ambitious imperial policy and undergirded a strong belief that the mission of empires was to make the world a better, more modern, more civilized place. What is remarkable, however, is the gap that Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have noted between the tools available and the extent to which they were put to actual use: "… between the *potential* that nineteenth-century social and technological innovations made available to imperial rulers and the limited spaces in which the new means were actually deployed. The empires that seem, over the course of world history, to have had the most resources with which to dominate their subject populations were among the shortest lived."[25]

The case of Great Britain is illustrative. After having so adroitly secured her control over the Suez Canal and transformed Egypt into an informal colony in the 1880s, Great Britain soon ran into troubles. The strong Egyptian national movement forced her to recognize Egypt's sovereignty in 1922. The fiasco of the Suez War (1956–57), when Britain – in cooperation with France and Israel – once again recklessly tried to play the imperial game but had to give in under pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, was the last nail in the coffin of British imperialism in the Middle East.

A distinctive feature of this period is the growing disconnect between repressive policies in the empires' colonies and borderlands, and the movements towards political freedom and wider participation in the metropoles. For a while, increased legal differentiation between the people of the metropole and the empires' outlying lands seemingly eased the contradiction: "As European publics claimed rights and citizenship for themselves, they defined a sharper division between a metropolitan polity for which such claims

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24 For reflections regarding the special characteristics of this period, see Ulrich Herbert, Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century, *Journal of Modern European History* 51 (2007), 5–21.

25 Jane Burbank/Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 288.

were relevant and an external sphere for which they were not."[26] Yet the contradiction never disappeared. It remained a thorn in the side of the metropolitan mind, usually felt more on the Left than on the Right. The agents of imperialism had to be aware that the mood in the metropole could change and, fueled by press reports about atrocious conditions in the colonies or borderlands, could turn against their imperial politics.

Last but not least, the period was marked by a hitherto unknown degree of mass violence and destruction. Without underestimating the brutality and destructive power of imperial rule in earlier times, the frequency of mass murder and genocide between 1880 and 1960, caused largely by imperial politics, gives this historical period a distinctly disturbing character, and it poses specific questions regarding the connection between imperial rule and mass violence. It was also the period of two exceptionally destructive world wars, both of which were to a large degree clashes of empires.[27]

The period came to an end with the process of decolonization and "de-imperialization" in the wake of the two world wars. In the cases of Germany, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, the cause was military defeat in Britain and France, the war deprived imperialists of the economic means to hold their empires together. Even though one could argue that the Cold War saw the emergence of two new empires in the shape of the United States and the Soviet Union, the character of their rule and the universalism of their self-ascribed, but to a certain extent sanctioned, missions distinguished them from the empires that emerged in the nineteenth century and disappeared in the mid-twentieth.

5. What this Book Is, and What it Is Not

This book goes back to the conference "Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Radicalization and Violence," which took place at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in January of 2010. The organizers of the conference, at that time FRIAS fellows, combined their respective research fields – the study of the late Ottoman Empire (Maurus Reinkowski) and the history of East Central Europe's borderlands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gregor Thum) – to formulate some common, overarching questions regarding the history of modern empires. During the early stages of

26 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 28.

27 Prusin, The Lands Between; Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg. The Clash of Empires, 1914* (Hamden, CT, 1991); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, 2010); Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'or et le sang. Les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris, 1989).

preparing the conference, Stephan Malinowski played an important role as well. The majority of the book's chapters grew out of this conference and the ensuing discussions regarding the analytical usefulness of paying more attention to imperial agents' experience of helplessness.

The explorations in this book are in many ways speculative and tentative. Also the figure of the "helpless imperialist" is not to be understood as an analytical concept. Much of what is embodied in this figure is the experience of vulnerability, whether real or perceived, which characterized all colonial and imperial ventures in moments of crisis. He or she stands for a recurring awareness among the representatives of empire that an irresolvable discrepancy between far-reaching goals and limited resources threatens both the existing imperial order and the realization of further imperial visions. Yet the figure of the helpless imperialist is far more than a trope. It cannot be reduced to a purely literary strategy, by which imperialists tried to come to terms with the strange, the mysterious, and the "dark." Helplessness goes beyond pure representation, since the experiences of helplessness were real on the psychological level. In the context of this book, helplessness is the imperialists' *perception* of a given situation, which was not necessarily based on a realistic assessment of the situation.

This book does not strive to paint a representative picture of all variants of imperialism in the period under consideration. Important historical examples, such as Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish imperialism are not touched upon. Instead of covering the full geographical range of the history of empire, we aimed at representing a large enough cross-section of cases to inspire broader discussion of the figure of the "helpless imperialist." It was important to us to represent both the maritime and the continental empires. While the former have long been at the center of attention within the field of imperial studies, with their focus on the history of European colonialism in Africa, a recently growing interest in the history of frontiers and borderland colonization has shed new light on the similarities and differences between these two imperial formations.[28] In the framework of this volume, therefore, we will use the term "imperialism" in a rather broad sense, although we are aware of the terminological and ideological mist that hovers around the terms. We understand "colonialism" as "the relations of domination and subordination among the different social groups caught up in the imperial system"[29] and do not treat it as a phenomenon to be studied apart from imperialism.

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28 Jörn Leonhard/Ulrike von Hirschhausen (eds.), *Comparing Empires. Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Göttingen, 2011).
29 Maier, Among Empires, 44.

Last but not least, we would like to stress that this volume does not intend to revise theories of colonialism and imperialism. The authors' goal is to shed light on an important aspect of imperial experience that has so far been only implicitly acknowledged. The essays included here show that the experience of vulnerability was a significant factor in the history of empires and that this factor had an impact on imperial action. The authors examine moments when imperial overconfidence and apparent strength turned into weakness and an awareness of the loss power and security. Imperial agents experience these moments of *peripety* sometimes as the culmination of a longer process, sometimes as a sudden event, but in either case as a dramatic turning point. At such junctures the gap between imperial goals and an empire's resources become seemingly unbridgeable. We are interested in coming to a better understanding of how empires and their agents react in these crises. We hope that this book may open new avenues of historical understanding and inspire new research on an important but understudied aspect of the history of imperialism.

Jörn Leonhard

Imperial Projections and Piecemeal Realities: Multiethnic Empires and the Experience of Failure in the Nineteenth Century

After a long dominance of the nation and nation-state in historiography, empires are back on the agenda.[1] Against the background of political, economic, and social processes operative in Europe since the early nineteenth century, historians long viewed the complex structures of Europe's multiethnic empires as inferior, a less attractive study object than the apparently homogeneous and efficient nation-state with its promise of external strength and internal unity through the participation of all citizens. This model also corresponded more convincingly with the premises of modernization theories, which assumed that traditional loyalties – that is, religious, local, or dynastic loyalties – would gradually yield place to the individual's identification with national entities.[2] In this view, multiethnicity stood for backwardness and the anachronistic character of empires in contrast to the

1 See John Darwin, *After Tamerlane. The Rise and Fall of Global Empires 1400–2000* (London, 2007); John Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009); Jane Burbank/Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010); Timothy H. Parsons, *The Rule of Empires. Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall* (Oxford, 2010); Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge, 2011); Ulrike von Hirschhausen/Jörn Leonhard, Zwischen Historisierung und Globalisierung: Titel, Themen und Trends der neueren Empire-Forschung, *Neue Politische Literatur* 56 (2011), 389–404.

2 See Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Oxford, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford, 2001); idem, *Nationalism and Modernism. A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London, *2001);* Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Program, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester, 1993); from the older literature, see Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in its Origin and Background* (New York, 1946); Eugen Lemberg, *Nationalismus*, 2 vols. (Reinbek, 1964); Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (New York, 1953); Miroslav Hroch, *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas* (Prague, 1968).

apparently unstoppable progress of ethnically homogeneous nation-states. A common focus on the dissolution of the continental empires as a consequence of the First World War further strengthened notions of the unavoidable decline of such structures, which manifested themselves in the paradigmatic formula of "rise and fall." Thus was Edward Gibbon's metaphor applied to the complexities of empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3]

 There are various reasons for this change in historiographic focus, and also for the revival of interest in empires evident in recent years. On the one hand, the dissolution of the Soviet Union generated a number of new nation-states in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. On the other hand, through an ongoing process of institutional Europeanization, as well as economic and cultural globalization, the notion of the nation-state has lost much of its credibility.[4] On yet a third level, the outburst of extreme ethnic violence in parts of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia underlined the problem states face in the attempt, sometimes apparently futile, to accommodate ethnic plurality.[5] Finally, the end of Cold War antagonism gave way to a new international strategy, whereby the United States (US) strove to maintain and partly expand her international engagement. The role of the US as the last remaining empire has provoked controversy on the potential and limits of empires in the past and in the present.[6] These political debates have been informed by the rediscovery and reinterpretation of past empires as a point of orientation, which in turn has fueled a new interest in alternatives to the nation and nation-state on the part of both academics and the

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3 See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London, 1776–1789); for recent literature, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); Richard Lorenz (ed.), *Das Verdämmern der Macht. Vom Untergang großer Reiche* (Frankfurt a. M., 2000); Emil Brix et al. (eds.), *The Decline of Empires* (Munich, 2001); Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends. The Decay, Collapse and Revival of Empires* (New York, 2001); Shmuel Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Decline of Empires* (London, 1970); Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire 1815–1918* (London, 1989); Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, 1961).

4 See Heinrich August Winkler/Hartmut Kaelble (eds.), *Nationalismus. Nationalitäten. Supranationalität* (Stuttgart, 1993); Barry Jones/Michael Keating (eds.), *The European Union and the Region* (Oxford, 1995); Karen Barkey/Mark von Hagen (eds.), *After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, CO, 1997).

5 See Aleksandar Pavcovic/Ivan Misic, *New States and Old Conflicts. Nationalism and State Formation in the Former Yugoslavia* (Canberra, 2002).

6 See Herfried Münkler, *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft. Vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* (Berlin, 2005); Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

wider public.[7] In contrast to the dominating premise of the past, which saw the disintegration and decay of empires as unavoidable, the present analytical focus is rather on the questions why so many empires lasted as long as they did, what accounts for their ability to function with a fair amount of success, and in what ways they contributed to the relative stability of the international order that prevailed between 1815 and 1914. On the other hand, there remains of course the question of the limits of empires' potential for integration.[8] In sum, a shift from the paradigm of "rise and fall" toward the "chances and crises" of empires is obvious.

Despite the new interest in empires and numerous recent publications of imperial histories, there is still a lack of comparative studies contrasting the nation-state and the empire. Furthermore, a fundamental dichotomy between empires and nation-states is still taken for granted by many scholars, although the history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows imperial elites beginning to look to the model of the nation-state. In fact, in many fields of concrete action, selected aspects of this model were imported. Instead of continuing their traditional policies of keeping a balance between multiple ethnic, religious, and legal diversities, many imperial elites were increasingly influenced by a common orientation along the norms, inventions, and processes of the apparently successful nation-states. Exploring the ways in which empires responded to the constellation of solutions offered by the nation-state helps us to better understand the transfers and entanglements between empire and nation-state.[9]

In many cases, reforms instituted on the nation-state model were a response to particular experiences of imperial failure, especially in wars. This is true for example, in the cases of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1848/49 and 1866, the Tsarist Empire after 1854/55, the Ottoman Empire after the 1870s, and the British Empire as it reacted to the South African War of 1899. But despite expectations, many of the reforms, once implemented, led to new problems that further curbed the freedom of imperial action. This essay looks at specific examples that illustrate this process, whereby imperial fail-

7 See Niall Ferguson, *Colossus. The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London, 2004); for a critical review of the latter, see Jörn Leonhard/Ulrike von Hirschhausen, 'New Imperialism' oder 'Liberal Empire'? Niall Fergusons Empire-Apologetik im Zeichen der 'Anglobalization', *Zeithistorische Forschungen. Studies in Contemporary History* 3 (2006), 121–28.

8 See Stephen Howe, When – If Ever – Did Empires End? Recent Studies of Imperialism and Decolonization, *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005) 3, 585–99; Paul Kennedy, Why Did the British Empire Last So Long?, in: idem (ed.), *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945. Eight Studies* (London, 1983), 199–218.

9 See Jörn Leonhard/Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2010); eidem (eds.), *Comparing Empires. Encounters and Transfers in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (Göttingen, 2011).

ure was answered by a strategy of "nationalizing" the workings of empire. I then look at the new and often unforeseen problems created by this strategy. From this perspective I propose to differentiate the meaning of imperial "success" and "failure" by rejecting the notion of a static antagonism between these concepts and concentrating instead on the complex interrelations between the two. Against this background, the conclusion reconsiders the connection between success, failure, and radicalization in imperial contexts. The range of evidence offered to support my consideration includes an exploration of imperial space through infrastructure projects, a look at maps and census figures as a means to survey diversity, an evaluation of the imperial monarchy's role as an institution of symbolic integration and, finally, a detailed analysis of the policy of military conscription as a prime example of an effort to import a national model into an imperial context. By bringing four empires onto the stage – the Habsburg Monarchy, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire – I intend also to transcend the classical separation between studies of maritime and continental empires.

1. Exploring Imperial Space through Infrastructure Projects

Over the course of the nineteenth century belief in the general progress of civilizations became ever closer linked to the growth of scientific knowledge and advances in new technologies. This had enormous consequences for internal state building, as the new nation-states of Germany and Italy demonstrate.[10] By comparison, the enormous geographic spaces occupied by empires confronted them with a challenge that nation-states did not share. In order to integrate the far-flung regions under their aegis and to render their rule over these peripheries more effective, imperial administrations had to understand the diverse conditions that pertain throughout this space and bring it under their control. To this end, large infrastructure projects such as railways, telegraphs, and canals became vital, underlining the need for the modern technologies without which it would be impossible to mobilize manpower and spread the benefits of progress and modernity. Transfers of knowledge, technology, and capital, often between empires and nation-states, were a consequence of this ambition. But these projects also provided

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10 See Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire. Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981); Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur. Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960* (Paderborn, 2004); Jens Ivo Engels/ Julia Obertreis, Infrastrukturen in der Moderne: Einführung in ein junges Forschungsfeld, Saeculum. *Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte* 58 (2007), 1–12.

opportunities for encounters between the colonizers and colonized, which often took a different shape and direction than had been intended by metropolitan elites. This interplay between imperial expectations of the value of progress and the actual experiences incurred while attempting to implement progress point to the many complexities involved and to the practical limits of imperial projections.[11]

The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, is a prime example. It was an imperial infrastructure, designed not only to connect the different parts of the British Empire but also to symbolize the Empire's progressive mission. In contrast to these projected goals, however, there developed a tension between imperial intentions and the way that locals accommodated and perceived the project. The Suez Canal restructured the mental imagination of the British Empire and brought the colonies, particularly India, much closer to the British homeland. Of this there can be no doubt. But at the same time imperial projections of the canal as a highway linking the various outposts of the Empire proved to be only a part of the story. The canal became a highway for other empires as well, and this led to increased competition in the international arena as well as to political pressures on the Empire that reflected and further complicated its international entanglements.[12] The canal symbolized a successful integration of empire, but the limits of that integration became obvious as a complex multiplicity of imperial and local agents and actors came on the scene, ranging from competing empires with their financial involvements to private commercial enterprises to coal mining and shipping companies. The canal contributed to a reconfiguration and closer integration of various imperial spaces, though its benefits were far from a British monopoly. It became instead a space of experience for competing empires, and a space in which local interests could be expressed and seeds of resistance grow. The latter included a revival of Islam as a force against foreign rule in the region.[13]

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11 See Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a. M., 2004); Valeska Huber, Multiple Mobilities: Über den Umgang mit verschiedenen Mobilitätsformen um 1900, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36 (2010), 317–41.

12 See Martin H. Geyer/Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism. Culture, Society and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford, 2001).

13 See Douglas Antony Farnie, *East and West of Suez. The Suez Canal in History, 1854–1956* (Oxford, 1969); Joel Beinin/Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile. Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, 1987); Valeska Huber, Highway of the British Empire? The Suez Canal between Imperial Competition and Local Accommodation, in: Leonhard/von Hirschhausen (eds.), Comparing Empires, 37–59.

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Up to now, the Age of High Imperialism (1850–1950) has been seen as a period characterized by the unchallenged economic, technological and military superiority of European colonial powers. This volume, however, highlights another, far less studied aspect of this era, namely, the empires' frustration, vulnerability and anxiety in pursuit of their imperial goals. The feeling of helplessness was a significant part of their experience and deserves more attention by students of empire. The chapters of this book deal with the relationship between failing colonial ventures and the loss of imperial control on the one side, and overcompensation and the turn towards excessively violent methods of rule on the other.

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