Introduction.
The First World War and
the Global Transformation
of Colonial Empires*

Sara Lorenzini

ABSTRACT

Die Einleitung bietet einen Überblick über die Entwicklung der Kolonialreiche nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Sie legt dar, wie in den 1920er Jahren das koloniale Ideal neu formuliert wurde. Durch die Schilderung der Folgen des Weltkriege in Afrika und im Nahen Osten deckt sie auf, wie der Friede von Paris 1919 und der daraus entstehende Völkerbund neue koloniale Machtstrukturen formalisierten. Anhand von britischen, französischen, deutschen und italienischen Fallbeispielen wird deutlich gemacht, dass die Politik der Nachkriegszeit, anstatt Emanzipation zu fördern, Konzepte von Rasse, Geschlecht und Staatsangehörigkeit verwendete, um neue konservative Strategien für den Erhalt imperialer Einheit zu artikulieren und institutionalisieren.

The essays in this special issue deal with the transformative power of the First World War on imperial identity. Empires, as Jürgen Osterhammel fittingly defines, are large, hierarchical structures of domination comprising multiple ethnic and religious differences, whose coherence is secured by threats of violence, unified administration, indigenous collaboration, and the universalist programme and symbols of an imperial elite.[1] More specifically, the empires considered here are colonial empires, which, according to Charles Maier, are states which rule dependencies by authoritarian methods while

---

* The editor would like to thank Aniket De for his precious editorial work on this Special Issue.

1 J. Osterhammel, Europamodelle und imperiale Kontexte,, in: Journal of Modern European History 2 (2004): 157–81.

governing their homelands by representative systems.[2] The articles in this issue discuss how colonial empires reshaped their policies towards colonial subjects after the global transformation at the wake of the First World War.

The narrative of the First World War as a watershed for empires is a classic one. The consequences of the war were more dramatic in Europe than in the colonies, given the collapse of the three land empires, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman. According to the standard narrative, the Great War marked the beginning of the end of an international system dominated by empires, soon to be replaced by an international system of nation-states on the Westphalian model. It was a turning point for colonial empires because it had a corrosive impact on imperial legitimacy.[3] However, the First World War had its origins in an era of high imperialism, was fought by imperial powers to determine who would dominate Europe and the wider world, and ended with the preservation of European imperialism for another generation.[4] It did transmit a sense of urgency that eventually helped accelerating the dissolution of colonial empires. But during the war, and even in its aftermath, 'the Empire was not only something to die for, it was an ideal to live for'.[5]

Although not fought primarily in or for colonial possessions, the First World War was a war of multi-ethnic, global empires.[6] It was global in nature mainly because from its inception the war involved colonial possessions. The European powers' imperial interests precipitated armed conflict in eastern, western, and southern Africa, in the Middle East, and on a smaller scale in Asia. Britain attacked German colonies in Africa before engaging in European fronts. In the Middle East, Allied forces confronted Turkish armies very early on. In Asia, Japan joined the war against Germany as early as August 1914. European and non-European soldiers from the colonies fought both in Europe as well as around the globe. The use of colonial soldiers to fight on the Western Front aroused the spectre of the demise of European supremacy. The participation of African and Asian troops in the slaughter of white men, their access to white women in ways before un-thinkable and, finally, the use of black soldiers in the post-war occupation all threatened the traditional imperial order of racial supremacy.[7]

In Africa, the introduction of conscription was labelled as "blood tax." The war caused the largest movement of Africans since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. It caused revolts,

---

2   C. S. Maier, Among Empires: American Ascendancy And Its Predecessors, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2006, p. 5.

3   E. Manela, The Wilsonian Moment, Oxford University Press, 2007; see R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911–1923, in: Diplomatic History (2014) 38 (4): 786-800, here p. 787.

4   J. H. Morrow jr, The Imperial Framework, in J. Winter (ed.), The Cambridge History of the First World War, vol. I, p. 428. On the caution adopted in the British Empire as for mobilisation of non white troops see B. Nasson, British Imperial Africa, in: R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, Empires at War: 1911–1923, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 130-151, here p. 405.

5   P. Yeandle, Citizenship, Nation, Empire: the Politics of History Teaching in England, 1870–1930, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

6   Gerwarth and Manela, Empires at War: 1911–1923, Introduction.

7   J. H. Morrow jr, The Imperial Framework.

and sunk the paternalistic myth of an untroubled civilising mission. During the war, colonial powers compressed produce prices and wages, thus affecting the living standards of producers and workers. Economic hardship and social distress soon fuelled social upheaval in the colonies. Demands from the colonial power included army conscription, forced labour service, pillaging of peasant homes, requisition of goods and compulsory cultivation of prescribed crops.[8] The war in Africa led to famine, disease, destruction and depopulation, and bolstered anticolonial politicisation. More than a million African soldiers who fought on various fronts participated in protest politics after the war, disillusioned at home by a system of African chiefly rule collaborating with colonial power. West Indian soldiers' service in their regiments in Africa and the Middle East stimulated the rise of Black Nationalism as they began the struggle for national liberation in the British West Indies. In Asia, non-white troops mainly served along the British in East Africa, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Egypt.[9] When not admitted as soldiers, Asians were used as foreign workers. Britain was sceptical of using Chinese labour, since it had been a problem in South Africa before the war, and instead insisted on the protection of white labour in the Empire. France was less worried about the use of Vietnamese labourers and soldiers.

The First World War drastically changed the global balance of power. At the end of the conflict, economic indexes suggested that the old colonial powers, namely Germany, Great Britain, France and Belgium, were regressing. The Habsburg and the Ottoman empires had collapsed, and Tsarist Empire had given way to the Soviet Union, a polity which called itself anti-imperialist. Yet, while in theory peace-making in Paris recommended the self-determining nation state as the only legitimate form of statehood, the victor states were all empires in one form or another. This was the case for Britain and France, whose empires expanded further, gathering important pieces of Ottoman Empire and appropriating previously German colonies through the new legal instrument of the mandates, which reconfigured the idea of the civilising mission as an international treaty law.[10] The latecomer aspiring empires, Italy and Japan, tried to catch up in a new great imperial game in the years after 1918. Even the United States was an empire, with its sovereignty extending to Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Panama and the Philippines.[11] After the war, empires not only survived but also expanded their sphere of action.

Imperial structures could find a cosy place in the League of Nations, which became a "guardian of empire" or even a sounding board for imperial governance, as pictured in Susan Pedersen's *The Guardians* or in Mark Mazower's *No Enchanted Palace*.[12] After the

---

8   B. Nasson, Africa, in: J. Winter (ed.), The Cambridge History of the First World War, I, pp. 433-458, here p. 449

9   G. Xu, Asia, ibid., 479-510, here p. 489

10   S. Pedersen, The Guardians : The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2015.

11   R. Gerwarth, The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923, London, Allen Lane, 2016, pp. 176-177.

12   M. Mazower, No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

war, the major colonial empires, France and Britain, set forth to execute their war plans for the Middle East, adapting to the new methods suggested by international law. In January 1919 the British Empire reached its peak, with a million additional square miles acquired in former Ottoman territories. In 1920 the French took control of Syria as a first step to their rule over Syria and Lebanon. After riots in Egypt (1919) and a revolt in Iraq (1920), the British government granted both regions limited autonomy in 1922. That same year, Britain acquired the League mandate over Palestine.

Peace-making in Paris after 1918 did not crush colonialism – rather, it formalised colonial power. Requests for the abolition of the colonial system, stemming not only from socialist movements and philanthropies but also from nascent pan African and pan Asian movements fell into deaf ears. The Covenant of the League of Nations, signed as Part I of the 1919 Versailles Treaty, specifically protected the colonial mind-set in two articles. Article 22 is the most well-known, because it is the article that introduced the mandate system, which entrusted to a specific great power territories that claimed independence but were not considered mature enough for it. In fact, it was the institutionalisation of the civilising mission under international supervision. But more explicitly the full endorsement of colonialism can be found in article 23, which lists the duties of colonial powers, including the just treatment of natives, the prevention of trafficking of women, children, drugs and arms, and the containment of disease. International law, the "gentle civiliser" of nations[13], civilised even racial prevarication, and formalised multiple standards, applying differential standards with respect to a civilisational ranking. The "mature" (white) civilisations were assigned the civilising mission; the new nationalities in Central and Eastern Europe had to enter obligations for the protection of minorities, while coloured races had no responsibility at all.

In the 1920s, the anticolonial rhetoric championed by Woodrow Wilson disappeared, and the word "empire" was trendy again. The colonial ideology was revived, now dominated by new ideas on the economic value of the colonies and new arguments about the administration of empire. Sir Frederick Lugard's 1922 book *Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* described Britain's indirect rule. In France, the Overseas Minister Albert Sarraut published *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* in 1923, arguing for modernising imperial administration and its economy. Even Italy declared its own empire as soon as it reached acceptable dimensions, following the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. In the 1930s, German claims to get back the colonies failed to make much of an impression: many in the League of Nations, including peace movements, requested a colonial redistribution to compensate for Versailles diktat.[14]

With the economic and financial crisis in 1929, the sense for promoting a new imperial harmony became widespread. "Unity in diversity" became the new slogan by anthro-

---

13   The reference is to M. Koskenniemi, The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

14   C. Metzger, L'empire colonial français dans la stratégie du Troisième Reich (1936–1945), Peter Lang, Bern 2002, pp. 14–54.

pologists who advocated respect for local traditions and ecologies. Colonial exhibitions offered an idyllic picture that hardly reflected reality. Peace after conquest was nothing but fictional, with armed resistance being the rule. Indeed, protests were crushed with violence. Such military operations in the colonies were known under the term pacification; the Amritsar massacre in Punjab (1919), Abd el Krim's revolt in Morocco between 1921 and 1926, upheavals in Java and Sumatra in 1926-27 and in Indochina in 1930 were notable instances. Restructuring empires required the extraction of more resources, which reinforced local protests. Younger generations' turning towards anticolonial nationalism and communism was a severe blow for the imperial system[15]. *Evolué* intellectuals worked to dismantle colonial ideology, and criticised the concept of western superiority. During the war, some members of the élites had seen the adversaries of the imperial system, such as Germany, the United States, and the Bolsheviks, as their natural allies. In the interwar years, Japanese ascendancy, Sun Yat-sen's China and Gandhian nationalism became models for political organisation and non-cooperation with colonial power. While the new ideologies combined traditions with imported liberal or Marxist influences, in the Middle East Islam forged important political connections.

This collection of essays represents a coherent selection of papers presented at the conference "Empires after the First World War: Ideas of Empire, Identity and Citizenship" held at the University of Trento on 19-20 May 2016. The contributions focus on how empires responded to the challenges of imperial identity following the Great War. Broadly, they argue that reform and not revolution had been of the agenda of those who criticised the existing imperial structures. Although the decline of empires has been portrayed as a historical inevitability, few people in 1914 or 1918 saw the fall of imperialism as inevitable. The papers agree that at the beginning and also at the end of the war, empire was to persist both for the colonial powers and the colonised peoples, notably in Africa. They also show that all colonial empires made an effort to rethink parts of their sovereignty, especially concepts of citizenship. In this way they accommodated requests from the colonised territories, which, in contrast, rarely claimed full equality in rights and duties- often considering adoption of Western models as immoral. This ensued reforms and actually revived imperial ideas for some time, forcing the imperial powers to export the welfare state in the colonies. The war of 1914–18, far from fulfilling Wilson's hope for a world safe for democracy, ended by protecting and enhancing the global rule of whites over other races. For an imperialist mind, military victories, the conquests of great territories and their subject populations became evidence of the racial and moral superiority of the conquerors.[16]

In most of the cases discussed here, colonial administrators represented the war as a unifying moment. This was done most clearly through the elaboration of new statutes for citizenship, a something typical and peculiar instrument of empires.[17] During the First

15   C. S. Maier, Among Empires, p. 134.
16   J. H. Morrow jr, The Imperial Framework, pp. 405-406.
17   J. Burbank and F. Cooper, Empires, in: World History. Power and the Politics of Difference, Princeton, Princeton

World War basic assumptions about race, gender, citizenship, and rights were fundamentally reconsidered.[18] The war affected citizenship in several ways. It created national communities transcending barriers of class, extended welfare, strengthened and expanded formal citizenship because of the broader conscription and introduced restrictions against enemy aliens.[19] The war had been in many cases a battle to prove loyalty, leading to promote imperial citizenship as a valid prospect. Multi-layered identities could find a synthesis in imperial nationalism more than in imperial disruption. Dan Gorman's paper on the ideas of imperial citizenship in the British Empire makes a strong case for this. The war, Gorman explains, intensified both imperial loyalty and anti-colonial nationalism. It accelerated imperial fragmentation, while the post-war emergence of international governance and the intensification of public and private international networks provided alternate supra-national modes of identification for imperial subjects. As a reaction, the war's most important legacy for the British Empire was to bring under the same hat the various and disparate imperial ideas and identities which had circulated before the war, thus forcing Britain to deal with questions of imperial citizenship within a unified field of vision.

In his essay on colonial reform in Algeria, Donal Hassett shows how Algerian political actors saw participation in the war as an opportunity to adjust the colonial system in their favour. Their vision of post-war society did not call into question imperial rule, nor did it fully embrace the principle of self-determination and the prospect of mass nationalist political movements. Activists in Algeria largely opted to pursue a programme for reform within the framework of a reconfigured French Empire. This translated into self-government for settlers, and in improved citizenship rights for natives. In the North African context, argues Hassett, the Wilsonian moment was realised because of a process of imitation. The Wafd Party in Egypt, for instance, triggered Wilsonian appeals as a mark of conformism while local leaders (such as Emir Khaled in Algeria) were not acting in the expectation of self-determination.

The British and the French faced similar predicaments and adopted double standards in dealing with native communities. In the British Empire, both in the dominions and in the white settler communities, service in the war promised a future of greater autonomy. This also meant greater sovereignty over immigration, including the possibility of introducing openly racist policies, which were not necessarily officially endorsed at all-imperial level. In other colonies, instead, the extension of citizenship rights prevailed. In the French Empire, as shown in Hassett's piece on France's most important colony, Algeria, the war created two sets of obligations. The central problem was the designing of a reform, which would placate indigenous elites without alienating the European settlers.

University Press, 2010; A. Miller and S. Berger, Nationalizing Empires, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2014. p. 8.

18   D. Ekbladh, Introduction: Legacies of World War I, Commemorative Issue, in: Diplomatic History (2014) 38 (4): 696-699 and H-Diplo Forum on "Legacies of World War I Commemorative Issue." Available at https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/67763/h-diplo-article-review-522-forum-%E2%80%9Clegacies-world-war-i.

19   A. Fahrmeir, Citizenship: the Rise and Fall of a Modern Concept, New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 119.

Paradoxically, Muslim identity offered a fantastic way out: extending full French citizenship was not acceptable for Muslim colonial subjects, who were comfortable keeping personal and family law within tradition.

This was the case of Italian colonies as well, as shown in the essay by Federico Cresti. In Libya, just as in Algeria, colonial empires were building on the accommodating tradition of Ottoman rule, where segmented categories of belonging could coexist. Given the plurality of religions and languages, collective and individual rights articulated in various ways. In his paper on post-war prospects for Libya, Cresti deals with the discussions that took place in government circles, political parties, and in the public sphere right after the war. The adoption of Italian Civil Law was not acceptable for the local population, who saw in the extension of Italian citizenship an "unbearable moral coercion". Both Muslim and Jewish traditions were to be maintained. After the war, Italian authorities preferred indirect rule to military direct annexation. Agreements negotiated with local authorities included prohibition of Muslim women to marry outside their religious group, application of family law according to religious tradition, acknowledgement of religious endowments, and non-applicability of laws on conscription and military service. The statutes granted to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1919 mentioned the uplifting "to the moral and political dignity of citizens". They stressed equality before the law and the guarantee of the Italian bill of rights (individual freedom, inviolability of domicile an property), the right to vote and to serve in the civil service and in the military, the right of emigration and the right to acquire metropolitan citizenship. At the same time, they allowed for differentiated personal law regimes and granted local education systems.

Sabina Donati addresses specific issues connected with personal law from the point of view of native women in several colonial settings. Her paper is a review article on the connections between gender identities and the imperial dimension. It has at its core the problems of interracial unions in Africa, with a focus on the Italian colonies there. It also discusses at length how citizenship was ruled for children born in mixed marriages. From the perspective of gender history, this paper reinforces the conclusions of the previous essays collected here, and makes it further clear that the racial divide was stronger than any other form of obligation or political necessity.

How the racial dimension prevaricated any other possible political consideration stands out especially in the paper by Florian Wagner on the German racist and potentially anti-Colonial Empire. After an interesting analysis on the cultural blindness that affected several important representatives of African pride, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Léopold Senghor and Aimé Cesaire, all fascinated by German culture and by the theories of the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius, Wagner explains why Germans were not able to pursue a consequent strategy using the support they could boost in former colonial territories in Africa (and beyond) in order to destabilise enemy empires. They did not even try to turn Berlin or Hamburg into anti-colonial metropolis, leaving the role of the *prima donna* to Paris. Wagner argues that the Germans were too racist to use solidarity with anticolonial movements as a political weapon. They firmly believed in the inferior-

ity of natives and did not even dream of challenging the principle of the international solidarity of the colonial powers.

As Akira Iryie contends, the Great War did not fundamentally alter the main tenets of its age. It did not change leaders' focus on geopolitics, the salience of the state, or the general segregation of the world's population.[20] The case studies collected here largely conform to Iryie's conclusion. Rather than planting seeds for the future collapse of colonial domination or engendering revolutionary understandings of modernity, the Great War as a global phenomenon served as an opportunity to promote conservative strategies of imperial unity while managing an increasing awareness of diversity. It disclosed the reality of reinforcing global rule of whites over other races, while paying lip service to ideas of cosmopolitan togetherness in rearranged plans of empire.

20   A. Iriye, The Historiographic Impact of the Great War, Diplomatic History (2014) 38 (4): 751-762.