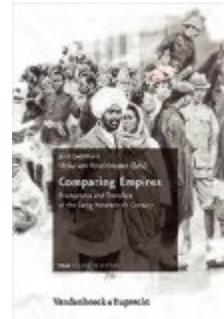


Jörn Leonhard, Ulrike von Hirschhausen. *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. 556 S. \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-31040-3.

Reviewed by Jack Faurey

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2012)



J. Leonhard u.a. (Hrsg.): Comparing Empires

As the editors of this collection observe, empires “seem to be back on the agenda” after the long domination of nations, nationalisms, and the nation-state (p. 10). It is indeed notorious that the last two decades have seen both a revival of interest in imperialism and a more positive reappraisal of many of its past practitioners. Debates over the moral character of imperialism, however, and the inflationary tendency to label any regime that a given writer finds “problematic and negative” as an empire have tended to hamper broader comparisons (p. 12). The editors have thus sought to foster a more comparative approach to the study of empires with this volume. In the process, they have brought together contributions by twenty-seven historians from Europe, North America, and Turkey to examine the challenges that confronted four specific empires (the British, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman) over the course of the long nineteenth century.

The editors and contributors take particularly strong exception to accounts that treat empires as doomed anachronisms, fated to wither before the inexorable rise of the nation-state. As a result, although the ostensible object of this book is to compare four European specimens of empire with each other, it is quite as much concerned with a larger comparison of empires with nation-states in the modern era. The twenty-two essays in this volume take as their starting point, for example, the assumption that empires differed most essentially from nation-states in their acceptance of ethnic diversity as opposed to the model of ethnic or national homogeneity promoted by the nation-state. They therefore set out

to analyze the manner in which four different empires dealt with multi-ethnicity during the period between the emergence of the nation-state as a viable alternative in the late 1700s and its apparent rise to normative status at the end of the First World War. To quote Leonhard and von Hirschhausen, they want to discover: “Which mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion provided stability to imperial rule? How did this balance change when it was confronted with growing international competition and with the new model of the nation-state? And in which ways did the empires and their multi-ethnic societies respond to this dynamic competition?” (p. 17)

The editors have expended considerable effort to ensure that the essays cohere and engage one another. The volume starts off with a very clear and useful prolegomena on the task of “Comparing Multi-Ethnic Empires in the Long Nineteenth Century,” which explains the rationale of the volume’s structure and reviews key theoretical considerations. The main body of the book is organized around six main themes, each of which is clearly of central concern not only to the four empires under consideration, but to all empires in the period. Finally, each of the six subsections is capped by a commentary essay.

The first group of essays is dedicated to “the Challenge of Imperial Space” (i.e. efforts to build modern networks of transportation and communication), on the assumption that the sheer size of most empires posed special problems of political integration that nation-states did not have to confront. The second section, on “Map-

ping, *Surveying and Classifying Multi-Ethnicity*," examines the uses of censuses, maps, and statistics as imperial tools of "political rule, national integration and social stratification" (p. 146). The third section, on "The Role of the Monarchy," examines the efforts of the British, Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman monarchies to embody, represent, and reconcile the disparate components of their empires, arguably as never before in their dynastic histories. The fourth section, looks at what we might term the chief cultural supports of empire: "Religion and Education," in a collection of essays that range from a comparison of Habsburg and Romanov religious policies to the institution of the caliphate in Ottoman dynastic ideology. The fourth section, on "Internal Conflicts," examines how these four empires reacted to some of their most serious and intractable internal challenges of the century: the Indian Uprising and the Boer War in the case of Britain, Hungary in the case of the Habsburgs, Poland for the Romanovs, and the Montenegrin-Albanian frontier for the Ottomans. The last section revisits "the Experience of the First World War" by looking at the responses of these four imperial governments and their subject populations to the outbreak of the Great War and the devastation which followed.

This collection of essays does not offer a new, unified narrative of imperial history in the nineteenth century, but it does make salient several common threads and patterns. A frequently recurring theme, for example, is the ambiguity inherent in the practices and technologies that modern imperial states used to knit their territories together. Major infrastructure projects like the Trans-Siberian and Baghdad railways, for example, gave empires greatly extended reach and integration, allowing them to shuttle troops, orders, and resources at unparalleled speeds from imperial centre to distant peripheries. Such projects were punishingly expensive, however, and did almost as much to undermine the very empires that built them once they fell into the hands of striking workers, Bedouin raiders, Narodnik assassins, and Young Turk or Bolshevik conspirators. Imperial censuses and statistic-gathering, similarly, provided opportunities not only for empires to count subjects and gauge their resources, but also for subordinate groups – Czechs in Bohemia, Greeks and Bulgarians in Rumelia, Brahmins in India – to advance their own particular demands for a greater share of the political and economic pie.

Another theme that emerges from these essays is the degree to which empire-building led not just to overt competition and conflict, but also to a rapidly expanding sphere of inter-imperial cooperation. Indeed, these

essays are a salutary reminder of the role of empires in building up the fabric of modern international institutions. V. Huber, for example, points out that although the Suez Canal was critically important to the British Empire, it remained "the highway of other empires as well" and a place where at least three major empires and many lesser states overlapped and cooperated in furtherance of their own interests (p. 58). In the case of telegraphs and railways, too, new imperial infrastructures led to greater integration between empires as well as within them, whether via the sharing of capital investment, technological cooperation, strategic linkage between national networks, or the creation of new international regulatory organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union. The essays on censuses, statistics, and map-making similarly show how empires played a key role in making these administrative tools more standardized and internationally comparable via their active support of such organizations as the International Statistical Congresses.

The essays in this volume also remind us of the critical impact of the crises that rocked these empires at mid-century: the succession of disappointments suffered by Russia between the Crimean War and the assassination of Alexander II; the Indian Uprising against British rule; the defeats suffered by Austria at the hands of Piedmont and Prussia; and the precipitous decline of Ottoman control over the Balkans between 1821 and 1878. The essays presented here show that most empires responded to these challenges by abandoning their own time-tested methods of cooptation, cooperation, and limited power-sharing. Instead, they turned increasingly to policies based on much more monolithic and totalizing conceptions of the state: e.g., universal male conscription, universal taxation, the uniform application of a single code of law, increased identification with a single ethnic or religious group, etc. Such expectations often seem, with the benefit of hindsight, to have been profoundly self-defeating, whereas more promising imperial solutions such as the British system of dominions or the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* were overlooked or undervalued.

Although this is thus an interesting and timely collection of essays, the reader is left with lingering doubts about the sharp distinctions drawn between modern empires and nation-states. In particular, it is too often assumed in this collection that empires were responding to the counter-examples provided by nation-states, when in many cases the more likely culprits were explicitly imperial traditions of state centralization and modernization dating back at least to the mid-1700s or to the new impe-

rial models provided by the French empires and the Second Reich. Further muddying the waters on this point is the fact that the contributors seem to treat France, Germany, and the United States as nation-states (i.e. in contrast to empires) – a categorization very much in need of qualification given the overseas possessions of all three by the early 1900s.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Jack Fairey. Review of Leonhard, Jörn; von Hirschhausen, Ulrike, *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37779>

Copyright © 2012 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.