



Helpless Imperialists. Imperial failure, radicalization, and violence. Freiburg i.Br.: Gregor Thum, FRIASM; Maurus Reinkowski, FRIAS/Universität Freiburg, 14.01.2010-16.01.2010.

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The object of the conference “Helpless Imperialists. Imperial failure, radicalization, and violence”, held at Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in mid-January 2010, was to go beyond the long-time supposedly valid assumption that empires embody power and superiority. Given the fact that the imperial rulers often found themselves in rather unstable power positions, the conference started from the underlying hypothesis that the ‘islands of white’ were positions of weakness rather than strength long before decolonization began.

In his introductory remarks GREGOR THUM emphasized the conference’s striking paradox that empires stand for power and strength but were often confronted with ambitious goals on the one side and limited military and economic means on the other. The focus of the conference, as he pointed out, was the threatened, frustrated imperialist in the time period between 1880 and 1960. The “Helpless Imperialist” shall be understood as a metaphor to gain a better understanding how agents of empires reacted in moments of crisis. A major challenge of the conference was to bridge the two research fields of colonial and imperial studies. Thum outlined the three central aspects of the conference: Imperial or colonial constellations, colonial and imperial agents, and the representations of their rule.

ISABEL V. HULL delivered the opening keynote on “Strategies of weakness.” She proposed to

interpret imperial endeavor as an exercise of weakness. Hull discussed several useful theoretical concepts, most prominently Hannah Arendt’s distinction of violence and power as opposites, not synonyms. Hannah Arendt, *On violence*, New York 1970. In Hull’s reading, Arendt’s distinction between both terms is particularly informative when distinguishing between state-sanctioned use of excessive, dysfunctional violence and its more dosed and regulated applications, as the former hints at the limited power of its users. Hull then lined out two kinds of imperial weaknesses: First, a technical absence of strength, for instance in infrastructure or availability of resources, and, second, a lack of legitimacy. These two dimensions of weakness produced different imperial policies. The former dimension led to the recognition of structural weakness, which was followed by long-term policies to overcome technical deficiencies. The latter, often neglected, dimension is rather a trope of the fear of weakness, which the military often used as a pretext to strengthen its position within the imperial structure. In her conclusion Hull lined out how weaknesses in an imperial setting may be further discussed during the conference: Firstly, as an actual strength of imperial power to admit seemingly weak policies, and secondly, as the metropole’s specific *mission civilisatrice* and the question whether the indigenous population was dispensable.

FREDERICK COOPER opened the first part of the conference on “Constellations” with a paper on “Seizing the Moment: Demanding Equality in French Africa.” Cooper examined two distinct political movements in the years immediately after World War II, when colonial vulnerability became particularly obvious: The drafting process of a new constitution for post-war France with African deputies demanding equal citizenship on the one side, and a worker’s strike movement in the French colony Senegal on the other. This twin struggle resulted in enhanced possibilities for the colonies to demand (albeit not necessarily gain) equal rights from the ‘motherland’ within the French Empire, Cooper concluded. The following discussion touched upon the 1950s as a decade of simultaneous de-colonization and re-colonization, with the Netherlands in the Dutch Indies and France in Indochina reclaiming their colonies, willing to drop the facade of a colonial empire but reluctant to abandon established power structures. Cooper raised the question whether these cases can be interpreted as examples of helpless imperialists or rather as stories of successful imperial policy. Cooper argued that during the post-war period the cost-benefit calculations showed unfavorable results for the imperial powers being unable to extend social welfare state structures of the metropole into the colonies.

The two papers of the first panel were devoted to the notion of “Helpless Helpers.” CLAIRE MARYNOWER turned to the question of helpless reformers, analyzing the efforts of French socialists in Algeria who often conceived of themselves and their reform efforts as helpful in the colonial setting. Socialists formulated and promoted structural modifications aimed at the establishment of a fair colonial administration. But reform attempts often failed and the Algerian experience left a collective trauma for the French Socialist Party. Marynower argued, however, that socialist efforts in the colonies were not completely futile. Their actions for as well as their dialogue with Algerian elites helped legitimize the “indigenous

politics” and its spokesmen. BOTAKOZ KASSYM-BEKOVA contextualized her paper on “Helpless Imperialists: European ‘Developers’ in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s” around a more typical historical setting of decolonization. In the case of Tajikistan, she identified lack of authority, failure and isolation as the main weaknesses of the Soviet imperialists. At the time, the Bolshevik take-over of the Russian Empire was officially presented as a step towards decolonization, with races or colonizers and colonized being equal. In this case, the anti-colonial discourse provided a fertile breeding ground for “anti-colonial” imperialism. Furthermore, Kassymbekova questioned whether the purges were a manifestation of shortcoming in governmental strength. She proposed an alternative approach to the repressions in the course of which even loyal socialists and followers of the regime were subject to fierce violence in the Soviet Republics and to interpret weakness as an underestimation of governmental strength in this context. The ensuing discussion centered on whether the Central Asian experience can be interpreted as an example of a distinct colonial experience or whether it should be integrated into the larger context of Soviet industrialization and collectivization. It also touched upon the difficulty of measuring failure or success of colonial and imperial policies and practices in general. Other topics included whether the USSR policies in the Soviet East and the Central Asian republics differed from those of France and Britain in Africa and Asia and whether there was anything particularly socialist about the failure of the French socialists in Algeria.

IAIN SMITH and ANDREAS STUCKI opened the second panel on “Imperial Violence and its Violent Alternatives.” Their presentation investigated the establishment of concentration camps in colonial contexts. Stucki and Smith analyzed Cuba and South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century where rival imperialisms were at work. They concluded that the camps in colonial arenas did not have much in common with the Nazi camps in

Germany and Europe, since concentration camps in colonial contexts had a military purpose as common dominator. ERIC D. WEITZ argued in his contribution “Imperial Dilemmas and the Great Partitions: The Case of Rwanda/Burundi” that post-1945 partitions of colonial arenas were a common exit strategy followed by imperial powers, practiced also in Palestine and Israel or India and Pakistan. In his example on Belgian colonialism in central Africa, Weitz asked in relation to whom the imperial powers were helpless. He concluded that Belgian colonial policies had radicalized the political and social order between the Hutu and the Tutsi and, in the end, the metropole had become helpless in a landscape of its own creation. Belgium proved especially helpless against the international community of the United Nations, which pushed for decolonization. The following discussion, which concluded the conference’s section on “Helpless Helpers,” revolved around whether the purpose of concentration camps in the colonies can be simply reduced to military needs or if it possibly can be interpreted as a measure of social engineering to win the local population.

The second part was on “Representations”. In a paper on male self-control and the loss of colonial rule, EVA BISCHOFF asked how a medico-psychiatric concept like tropical neurasthenia (*Tropenkoller*) gained popularity in Germany during colonial times and what role the media played in this process, especially literary representations in colonial novels on the topic. In this context, the helpless imperialist is a rhetorical figure in a rhetorical discourse. Bischoff analyzed the discourse of the male nervous breakdown as an interconnected topic to a number of other discourses, notably scientific debates about neurasthenia, the debate over the objectives and limits of German colonial enterprise in general, and domestic problems, such as the abuse of military recruits by their superiors. Hence, the discourse on nervous breakdown connected Germany’s colonial endeavor to the discourse on German masculinity.

THORALF KLEIN discussed the conceptual framework of his paper “Insecurities of Imperialism. The Siege of Beijing and Its Aftermath in the ‘Western’ Press, Summer 1900”. He compared the latest war in Iraq to the Boxer Uprising as an imperial endeavor where the western observer has only restricted access to information from secondary media sources. In his paper presentation he traced a shift in press coverage during the Boxer Uprising from the threat to the socio-cultural hierarchies and the helplessness of the besieged imperialists to a debate on moral failure of the empire and atrocities committed by the Allied troops. In his presentation on “Intelligence Failure and the Paranoid Style in Colonial India” KIM A. WAGNER showed long-term impacts of deficient colonial intelligence. Dealing with the relation between knowledge and power Wagner challenged the assumption that colonial knowledge simply enabled political control. Often the opposite was the case, as the intelligence failure of 1857, which led to an uprising, confirmed: The colonial state was structurally weak because it misinterpreted information on the actual threats. Thus, intelligence created the paranoid style of British politics that put the colonial rule in India at peril. The subsequent discussion focused mainly on production of knowledge and included points of interest such as the kind of intelligence the colonizers collected, background and motivation of local informants and the extent to which the colonial administration exerted control over the production of knowledge. A few discussants lined out variations of knowledge production. JANE BURBANK, for example, spoke about the flexible adaptation to different challenges in the production of knowledge in the Russian case, accepting a multi-language empire of different cultures within the empire. Furthermore, it was proposed that the Boxer War media coverage could be seen as a case where the imperial and colonial gap was bridged, since the style of media coverage on the Boxer War proved to be quite similar to German news coverage on an uprising in Poland. Additionally, JAINE CHEM-

MACHERY suggested that the fictional colonial space acts as telltale sign of a multi-faceted crisis in her presentation on “the Representation of Imperialist Characters in Somerset Maugham’s and Rudyard Kipling’s Short Stories on Empire.” By representing their central characters as helpless imperialists, she argued, the two authors unveil their doubts about the potential sustainability of empire. While Kipling wrote at a time of colonial expansion, Maugham’s writings already reflect the decline of the British Empire and a general atmosphere of decolonization. SANDRA MAß’ paper expounded the representation of Germany’s War in German East Africa during the Weimar Republic years and revealed some examples of memorial literature which did not fit the heroic image of the white man. Since quite a wide range of approaches to the concept of the helpless imperialist had been offered in the presentations already, Maß reiterated several ideas on the usage of the helpless imperialist’s figure. She elaborated on her own definition of “helplessness” as an emotional hopeless situation, a definition, which of course excludes macro-level approaches to the conference’s concept. She further cautioned historians to use the analytical framework with too much levity, since the rhetorical figure of the helpless imperialist itself has a long colonial history, as Joseph Conrad’s character Marlow in the novella “Heart of Darkness” demonstrates. Joseph Conrad, *Youth*, a narrative, and two other stories, *Edinburgh* 1902. Maß proposed to disentangle the concept from the narrative of violence and use it for other topics such as the female helplessness in the colonial context. The discussion took up the gender aspect, giving examples of white women being raped by black or Indian men as a common contemporary literary topos. Even though women were represented as the endangered, the weakness discourse had a male bias in many cases, since it was a white man’s helplessness to defend the opposite sex. Other speakers cautioned to reduce the idea of the Helpless Imperialist simply to a trope, since then it would neglect authentic con-

ditions of danger such as assaults on consuls in Jeddah discussed in the following presentation.

The five papers of the conference’s third and largest section focused on groups and institutions as “Agents.” In her paper presentation “Helpless Representatives of the Great Powers: Western Consuls in Jeddah in the 19th Century,” ULRIKE FREITAG addressed the role of British and French consuls in a far-off Ottoman province, their working conditions, problems and tasks. Jeddah, a gateway to Mecca and a trading center between Europe and the Indian Ocean, was in many respects also a remote place, where consuls were much less in contact with local society than consuls in other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Compared to consuls in Izmir or Beirut, diplomats in Jeddah did not represent parts of the population and lacked political or economic support accordingly. Freitag argued that, in spite of being representatives of strongest imperial powers, the consuls were often extremely vulnerable, exactly because they represented potent colonial empires. Conflicts between the consuls and Ottomans appeared frequently, and diplomats were targets of occasional assaults. In his paper “Sex and Control: Venereal Disease and the Medical Profession in Germany’s Colonies, 1884–1914,” DANIEL JOSEPH WALTHER examined the capillaries of power through the theoretical lens of biopolitics. He analyzed the role of the medical profession as an agent of German imperialism in the context of fighting venereal diseases in the colonies. The German medical staff used the threat of power to justify the extension of medical authority over the indigenous population. Yet the lack of funds and the occasional indigene’s unwillingness to cooperate frustrated the doctors. They achieved only limited success, thus revealing the limitations of colonial power they were intended to exert. The discussion then centered on the extent to which colonial space offered special possibilities to the medical profession. Drug testing in the colonies was common, and its side effects on the indigenous population willingly accepted. A clear answer was

not found as similar policies such as forced health and hygiene examinations were also carried out in uncontrolled spaces like working class neighborhoods in the motherland at the time. Subsequently, DIERK WALTER enquired about rare cases of defeat when imperial armies lost open battles against 'savages.' He analyzed the patterns of tactical defeats in six case studies. The main reason for the defeat of imperial armies was usually a combination of several factors such as the unsuitability of modern European warfare techniques to the terrain in colonial countries, well-organized and determined enemies, and overwhelming numbers of opponent fighters. The ensuing discussion highlighted the notion that a victorious battle did not necessarily translate into winning a war. As only the Vietminh in Indochina won a war against colonizers, the question was raised whether it is appropriate to talk about helpless imperialists in this context. Another notable topic of discussion was the ability of both colonizers and colonized to adapt the respective opponent's warfare techniques and whether imperial armies resorted to "irregular" guerilla warfare. In her presentation on "'The Thin Blue Line?' Policing German Southwest Africa, 1905-1918," MARIE ANNA MUSCHALEK took up Isabel V. Hull's ideas regarding the violence and state power nexus. Muschalek explored the dynamics of violence in everyday practices of German colonial police forces in German Southwest Africa. She asked how helpless an imperial agent such as the *Landespolizei* was. The *Landespolizei* comprised only 600 men and carried out its duties in a rather improvised manner in a territory much larger than the metropole. She concluded that rather a feeling of perceived helplessness prevailed among the police. In contrast to Muschalek, MARTIN THOMAS' paper "Communal Policing, Policing Work, or Intelligence Gathering? A Sociology of the Colonial Gendarmerie in French North Africa, 1918-1945" emphasized the problems of colonial policing and analyzed the composition, working conditions, communicational limitations, and op-

erational priorities of the gendarmerie in French-ruled Maghreb. In many respects the police officers were the incarnation of colonial rule, occasionally even collecting taxes. Thomas concluded his presentation by pointing out that gendarmerie brigades became more repressive and less effective over time. They were gradually reduced to a riot and labor control force, and employed to contain unrest in North Africa. In so doing, they rather responded to violent conflicts and did not take measures to prevent escalation. The subsequent discussion revolved around differences between the metropole and its colonies. The space where violence was tolerated was surely much larger in the colonies. An explanation could be the racial discourse that reinforced racial boundaries. African policemen often had to carry out violent punishments as the colonizers normally viewed all Africans as more violent. Another object of discussion was the idea of the improvised state and its relation to violence, where violence occurred more unpredictably and in varying degrees, which might be more helpful than the strong or weak state-concept.

The conference's last panel was opened by MICHAEL PESEK who discussed the life of Richard Kandt as an agent of colonial rule in Rwanda. He asked how colonial politics at the periphery of empire were implemented. His approach underlined the importance of the presence of the colonial state via the colonial agents. Pesek argued that Kandt was a melancholic "lonely imperialist" in a twofold way: Although he was married to an African woman he remained an outsider in the colony, largely isolated from ordinary Rwandans. Similarly, he had remained an outsider in German colonial society, kept at distance to the colonial bureaucracy. CHRISTOPH KAMISSEK followed the path of General Lothar von Trotha, Governor of German Southwest Africa, from Dar-es-Salam to the Waterberg. He questioned the notion that the extreme extent of the violence exerted against the Herero was a fundamental consequence of the colonizers' frustration. He relativized the role of

frustration and helplessness in general. Subjects of the following discussion were how helplessness relates to dependency, such as the dependency on help of the natives, and Kandt's life. An attempt was made to bridge the gap between colonial and imperial frontiers by drawing an analogy between Kandt's early life at the "German frontier" in the vicinity of Poznan and his later life at the colonial frontier in Africa.

The main objective of the conference's three sections on constellations, representations and agents in the colonial and imperial realm was to test the interpretational framework of the helpless imperialist. Most of the conference's presentations and contributions to the discussion touched upon this topic, but only few testified to the complexity of the explanatory potential of the concept of the helpless imperialist using examples from different empires and various colonial settings. Some participants argued in favor of the analytical value of the imperialists' helplessness, others ignored this concept or offered good reasons to put a question mark behind it altogether.

In his concluding comment, ANDREAS ECKERT remained skeptical about the analytical helpfulness of the imperialists' helplessness. In his view, this concept scope does not offer the analytical value that its proponents attribute to it. In many cases, it proved inappropriate to account for the variety of colonial politics due to its limitation to a very narrow topic within the colonial studies. Furthermore, it does not fully overcome the dichotomy between colonizers and colonized although it challenges the notion of the strong colonizer and illuminates some barriers and problems the imperial agents faced in the colonies. Eckert suggested advocating subaltern perspectives more strongly. He advised historians to investigate the side of the colonized more, which had been largely neglected during the conference. He further criticized the lack of novelty of a number of the issues discussed during the conference, such as the entanglement between metropole and

colony. With a view to Hannah Arendt's theoretical concept of violence as used by some of the contributors as an analytical inroad, he voiced reservations about its utility for study of the colonial age. He encouraged scholars to take a wider range of colonial agents into consideration, since the presented scope was restricted to a few groups of people and omitted missionaries or other significant groups. Given the fact that colonizers had to find compromises with the indigenous population, Eckert suggested that the aforementioned points could be integrated into an analytical framework around a concept of compromises. Finally he asked to what extent the topic of helplessness might be relevant to understand current affairs, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. JÖRN LEONHARD, the second commentator, was more positive in his concluding statement. He pointed out that the concept of helplessness offers ways to overcome traditional role models and sheds light on the colonizers' often hybrid characters in consideration of its scope and its shortcomings. In his opinion, the concept also illuminated the complex and changing relationship between action and representation, and a number of papers impressively underlined this dual approach to helplessness. Others cautioned against an overstatement of the helpless imperialist as such overstatement might be perceived as the norm rather than the exception. Analytical terms such as "weakness," "failure," and "helplessness" would merit more detailed definitions. The notion of violence, which had played a crucial role in this conference, was not always clearly distinguished from weakness. Further differentiation needs to be undertaken between the historical use and the ex post factum use of failure and helplessness. Leonhard then offered several additional analytical inroads that go beyond the conference's scope. He suggested to investigate intertwined histories and to compare several empires, to explore the differences between metropole and colony more deeply, and to focus more on *longue durée* studies and diachronic aspects, since historians want to

explain change over time. Finishing his remarks, Leonhard offered some general reasons for the helplessness of imperialism in the time period (1880–1960) under consideration. Firstly, the relationship between the metropolises and the colonies changed as mass communication and higher trading volumes brought the colonies closer to their metropolises. Secondly, he referred to the general dilemma of increasing expectations and decreasing possibilities of action in the colonies over time.

ULRICH HERBERT and other discussants criticized the selection of the conference's case studies. About a third of the papers tackled Germany's colonial endeavor even though Germany is generally thought to be one of the least important colonial empires in world history, while other colonial and imperial powers, such as Japan, the United States, Spain, Portugal or Italy were neglected. The final discussion centered again on the usefulness of the term "Helpless Imperialist" as an analytical tool. The participants agreed that it was conducive to insightful enquiry but did not necessarily represent a broad analytical framework. MAURUS REINKOWSKI suggested conceiving of the helpless imperialist as a figure rather than a concept. In his view, it illuminates human experience and representations in literature as it points historians to specific situations of imperial failure, be it imperial politics or technologies. Unlike "weakness," "helplessness" stresses the emotional and psychological experience of imperial agents and expresses a certain suddenness thereof.

Conference Overview:

Keynote

Isabel V. Hull (Cornell University): Strategies of Weakness

Introduction

Maurus Reinkowski (FRIAS/Universität Freiburg) and Gregor Thum (FRIAS)

Part: Constellations

Frederick Cooper (New York University): Seizing

the Moment: Demanding Equality in French Africa

Panel: Helpless Helpers

Claire Marynower (Sciences Po Paris): Socialists in Algeria (1919–1962): Helpless Reformers?

Botakoz Kassymbekova (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Helpless Imperialists: European "Developers" in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s

Panel: Imperial Violence and its Violent Alternatives

Iain Smith (University of Warwick) and Andreas Stucki (Universität Bern): The Colonial Development of Concentration Camps (1895–1908)

Eric D. Weitz (University of Minnesota): Imperial Dilemmas and the Great Partitions: The Case of Rwanda/Burundi

Part: Representations

Eva Bischoff (Universität Bonn): "Wollüstige Grausamkeit." Male Self-Control and the Loss of Colonial Rule

Thoralf Klein (Universität Erfurt): Insecurities of Imperialism. The Siege of Beijing and Its Aftermath in the "Western" Press, Summer 1900

Kim Wagner (University of Edinburgh): Intelligence Failure and the Paranoid Style in Colonial India

Jaine Chemmachery (Université Rennes 2): The Representation of Imperialist Characters in Somerset Maugham's and Rudyard Kipling's Short Stories on Empire

Sandra Maß (FRIAS/Universität Bielefeld): Male Hero or Psychotic Colonialist? Remembering the War in German East Africa (1914–1918) in the Weimar Republic

Part: Agents

Panel: Groups and Institutions

Ulrike Freitag (Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin): Helpless Representatives of the Great Powers: Western Consuls in Jeddah in the 19th Century

Dierk Walter (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung): Why Imperial Armies Are (at Times)

Defeated by “Savages:” Six Case Studies

Daniel Joseph Walther (Wartburg College): Sex and Control: Venereal Disease and the Medical Profession in Germany’s Colonies, 1884–1914

Marie Anna Muschalek (Cornell University): “The Thin Blue Line?” Policing German Southwest Africa, 1905 –1918

Martin Thomas (Exeter University): Communal Policing, Policing Work, or Intelligence Gathering? A Sociology of the Colonial Gendarmerie in French North Africa, 1918–1945

Panel: Individuals

Michael Pesek (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Richard Kandt or the Lonely Imperialist: The Making of Colonial Politics at the Very Periphery

of Empire

Christoph Kamissek (European University Institute): Individual Frustration or Professional Learning? The Path of General Lothar von Trotha from Dar-es-Salam to the Waterberg, 1894 –1904

Concluding Comments

Andreas Eckert (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Jörn Leonhard (FRIAS/Universität Freiburg)

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