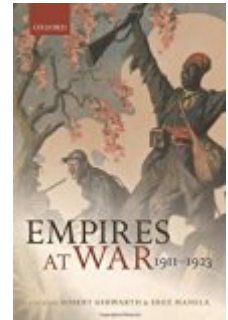


**Robert Gerwarth, Erez Manela.** *Empires at War: 1911–1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 304 S. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-870251-1.



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Imperial encounters on a personal level happened during World War I and were written down long before historians of the war (Marxists excluded) began to employ “empire” as a category of analysis for understanding it. In his influential war memoir, *Storm of Steel* (1920), Ernst Jünger recalled such a moment of imperial contact on the western front. He and his men heard “strange jabbering” coming from the woods and discovered wounded enemy soldiers from whom “exotic calls and cries for help” could be heard. To Jünger’s interrogation “Quelle nation?” the enemy replied “Pauvre Rajput!” The German realized he had been fighting against a regiment of Indians “who had travelled thousands of miles across the sea, only to give themselves a bloody nose on this godforsaken piece of earth against the Hanoverian Rifles.” A linguistic volley ensued. To ingratiate themselves with their captors, the Indians called out: “Anglais pas bon!” Jünger mused, “Why these people spoke French I couldn’t quite understand. The whole scene—the mixture of the prisoners’ laments and our jubilation—had something pri-

mordial about it. This wasn’t war; it was ancient history.”[1]

What brought these two men, Jünger and the Indian, face to face in the mud? The volume under review will answer: empire. But not empire in a “realist” understanding as a quasi-human agent that thinks, acts, and craves. Rather, empire in this volume is a depersonalized, disembodied system that exists for the “hierarchical management of difference” (p. 255). The uniformly insightful essays use this definition as a departure point for a new global history of World War I.

The editors, Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, admirably set out two clear aims, evident in the book’s title: they want to expand the study of World War I both spatially, moving beyond Europe to consider the global ramifications of empire, and temporally, stretching the war’s time frame from 1911 to 1923. Why these dates? The Italian attack on Ottoman territories in North Africa in 1911 is taken as a starting point to a cycle of armed imperial conflict. Among other

events, the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne and the end of the Irish Civil War suggest 1923 as a suitable pause (though by no means end) to this cycle of imperial violence. One need not quibble with dates; of course other events before and after these might stand in equally well as new book-ends. But the volume is persuasive in insisting that World War I was not a “European” war and that it lasted longer than 4.5 years.

The volume works on two distinct levels. First, it provides a theoretical framework for thinking about empire, and second, it offers twelve “case studies” in which the definitions and contours of “empire” are applied. The nation-state is dislodged as the unit of analysis as the Great War comes into focus as “a war of empires, fought primarily by empires and for the survival or expansion of empire” (p. 15). Gerwarth and Manela present Charles Maier’s definition of “empire” as an anchor. Empires, Maier wrote in 2006, are supranational entities characterized “by size, by ethnic hierarchization, and by a regime that centralizes power but enlists diverse social and/or ethnic elites in its management” (p. 3).[2] Many authors in this collection return to this definition explicitly, lending theoretical coherence to the volume as a whole.

The case studies are presented by contributors who are already recognized as leading scholars in the field on “their” particular empires. The table of contents reads as a Who’s Who of imperial history of the early twentieth century. Sensibly, the volume begins with Mustafa Aksakal’s consideration of the Ottoman case. The aforementioned Italian attack on Ottoman North Africa and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 revealed the empire’s vulnerabilities. Ottomanism, “the movement emphasizing coexistence of the Ottoman peoples of different religious and ethnic backgrounds within the imperial framework,” did not hold as an organizing principle during World War I (p. 22). Armenians, Kurds, Jews, Arab Christians, Arab Muslims, and Orthodox Christians were all suspected

at various points of harboring Entente loyalties. These suspect communities, constituting the majority of the empire’s population, were placed under strict surveillance. Treatment of the Armenian population is well known; perhaps less well known are the deportations and public hangings of Arab leaders that began in 1915 in Syria and Mount Lebanon. Aksakal notes that further research is needed on whether the state used food as a weapon against the people of this region, but concludes in any case that wartime famine and the state’s own policies “enfeebled Ottoman legitimacy in the Arab lands” (p. 29). The Ottoman case most closely resembles the Habsburg and Russian empires that similarly proved unable to contain or manage the ethnic and religious pluralities within. All three struggled with what Leonard V. Smith, in a later chapter, calls empire’s “hierarchical management of difference” (p. 255).

Joshua Sanborn’s authoritative chapter on Russia handles both civilian and military aspects of the war. He notes that the war on the eastern front was fought in “colonized spaces” of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Thus, the Russian army was “an army of occupation even when it was fighting on its own side of the 1914 border” (p. 94). Self-occupying its own territory, the Russian General Headquarters took over management of civilian affairs, placed huge swaths of territory under martial law, and proved far less capable of governing than the civilian administrators they had replaced. Sanborn highlights the mass migration of refugees all over the Russian Empire; this demographic upheaval proved to be a “nationalizing experience” for many of the displaced communities. A labor shortage prompted the tsar in 1916 to draft ethnic minorities who had been exempted from military conscription—men from Central Asia—into work brigades. Protest riots ensued, rail lines were attacked from within, and an “openly anti-colonial civil war was underway” (p. 100). Sanborn offers something useful that historians sometimes forget: dates, an addition that will be appreciated by the nonspecialist.

He writes, “If we were to pinpoint a moment when imperial rule moved from a crisis situation into a revolutionary situation, it would be here, in the summer of 1916 in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan” (p. 99). In most twentieth-century historiography on Russia, World War I is overshadowed by the Bolshevik Revolution. It is refreshing to read this history of the empire *at war*.

Next door, Germany strove to maintain and develop itself as an empire in three ways. Heather Jones offers a very strong, smart essay that synthesizes a large, diverse body of scholarship on the imperial project of the *Kaiserreich*. Although the term “Reich” translates as empire, not a few historians have struggled to articulate just what it means to call Germany an empire after 1871. One might characterize Jones’s essay as an explication of the “Reich-ness” of this Reich. She proposes three levels of imperial activity: internal, continental, and global. Concerning Alsace-Lorraine and the ethnically Polish areas in the East, she finds a discourse on “colonial spaces to be conquered within the frontiers of the state” (p. 54). Second, Germany sought to expand into a land-based continental empire by occupying and eventually colonizing (as “Ober-Ost,” for example) precisely the same territory that in Sanborn’s essay the Russians unsuccessfully “self-occupied.” Third, of course, Germany hoped to build on its small collection of overseas territories. That it lost several of these immediately in 1914 (Togo and Qingdao), and the others by 1916 (with the exception of East Africa), reveals the tenuousness of German status as an overseas colonial power. But here levels two and three of the imperial framework converge: as colonial ambitions died overseas, they ramped up in eastern Europe. Eventually *Lebensraum* would become the “cumulative heir” to what “had once been envisaged for the three components” of German wartime imperialism (p. 72).

Although vastly different in makeup, the French and Austro-Hungarian empires (the latter

necessarily referred to as a monarchy) did share one feature: each saw in war an opportunity to standardize what had been perceived as haphazard or uneven rule. Peter Haslinger notes that prior to 1914, Francis Joseph I had enjoyed “integrative flexibility” in managing his domains. His state rested on the “complex constitutional arrangements and discretely encouraged constitutional experiments to balance competing national movements.” The war subsequently “fostered initiatives to substitute the complex political fabric” of the dual monarchy with “a clear structure of quasi-national states” predominated by Germans and Hungarians (p. 80). In other words, some saw the war as an opportunity to standardize, streamline, and make less particularistic the Habsburg political landscape. (This did not happen, of course.) In France, a call for standardization came after 1918. In a rich essay on the cultural and economic ties between metropole and colonies, Richard S. Fogarty reconstructs a postwar discourse in which the war was thought to have taught a lesson: there were calls for an “end to the ‘caprice’ and haphazardness that had marked the building of the empire, and the inauguration of a ‘regular plan’ for colonial economic development” thereafter (p. 117).

For two empires—Portugal and Italy—the past figured significantly in wartime imperial strategies. Readers of this volume less familiar with Portuguese history will find in Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses’s essay a succinct, accessible review of the early twentieth century. Portugal, becoming a republic in 1910, was led by nationalists who had a “flawed reading of Portuguese history by which the national genius manifested in the past, notably at the time of the Discoveries” (p. 180). Held in low regard by other Europeans as a country too impoverished itself to run its colonies, Portugal was not able to mobilize its human and material resources during the war. It did successfully mobilize tens of thousands of African porters who served Portuguese and British forces in Africa. But uniquely, “metropolitan Portugal was mobi-

lized to secure the boundaries of empire ... rather than the reverse” (pp. 184-185). In other words, quite unlike France, it sent far more men *to* Africa than it recruited to Europe *from* Africa.

Italy, too, had the imperial prowess of its distant past in mind as it embarked on early twentieth-century empire building. Hanging over the modern-day “Third Italy” were “First Italy” (ancient Rome) and the “Second Italy” (the Renaissance). Those were big shoes to fill. When they seized the Ottoman vilayets of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911, “romantically renamed ... ‘Libya’, the title they had held under the Caesars,” the Italians thought they would find Arab, Berbers, and Jews grateful for liberation from the Ottoman oppressors (p. 35). Instead, during the First World War, the Italians were unable to garner support from the local populations and lost, one after another, hold on the territories occupied up to 1914. Richard Bosworth and Giuseppe Finaldi assert that for Italy “the issue had [now] become simple: did empire matter or should it concentrate on its irredentist ambitions in Trento and Trieste?” (p. 40). In this case, Europe trumped Africa. What, besides glory, had the Italians wanted in Africa? The authors argue that they desired land. “What Italy expected of empire was not Italophone natives running their own affairs, with a ‘district commissioner’ here and there overseeing taxes and law and order, but land. Italy wanted an Australia or an Argentina, not an India” (p. 51). No such colony developed. By 1921, only about thirty thousand Italians lived in Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya combined.

Japan was a significantly more formidable player on the international stage in 1914 than it had been during the nineteenth century. In the two decades prior to the outbreak of the world war, building on victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1895) and Russo-Japanese War (1905), Japan moved from Asian to fledgling global power. Unlike some of the other empires under study in this volume, Japan was not adding to its formal em-

pire between 1914 and 1919; but, as Frederick R. Dickinson recounts, the war in Europe “brought nothing but good fortune to Imperial Japan” (p. 201). Throughout his impressive chapter, we see the European powers distracted, not paying close attention to affairs in Asia, and Japan capitalizing on this distraction. Early in the war, it acquired the right to Germany’s former concession in Shandong. Thereafter, Japanese leaders “remained particularly vigilant from the start about Chinese actions during the global conflict” (p. 208). Japan was unable to prevent China from sending 140,000 laborers to the western front, but managed tighter control over subject peoples in formal colonies, Taiwan and Korea. Its greatest military operation of the war was the Siberian expedition in 1918 and it remained active in the Russian Civil War. Dickinson notes that the Paris Peace Conference itself did not bring peace to East Asia. Rather, the subsequent Washington Conference addressed “the most pressing post-war geopolitical issue in East Africa, the incredible wartime rise of Japanese power” (p. 211).

China meanwhile had to contend with the humiliating Twenty-One Demands that Japan had presented in 1915. These severe demands aimed to make China a vassal state. Xu Guoqi analyzes the fascinating responses of the Chinese government; Yuan Shikai, president of the fledgling republic, declared himself emperor in 1916. Just five years after the founding of the republic, the move from republicanism to monarchism made sense, and was even advocated by international advisors, on the grounds that, quoting contemporary Li Jiannong, “republicanism does not suit the national condition.... Unless there is a great change of policy, it is impossible to save the nation” (p. 219). Yuan’s monarchical scheme “ended on disaster,” but the idea of restoring the Chinese Empire did not die. A second attempt followed, this time to restore the Qing emperor, but the scheme lasted about one week. It was the aforementioned large flow of Chinese laborers to France during the war that secured China a voice on the postwar

peace negotiations. The laborers, Xu explains, were essential to the “grand plan to have China join the community of nations as an equal member.” Their presence in France would “forge a crucial ink between China and the West, and would be a daily reminder to the world of the strategic relevance of China’s ‘laborers as soldiers’ program” (p. 230). Despite such hopes, the Chinese came away disappointed by the territorial decisions reached at Versailles. Young intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, stung by the “betrayal” there, launched a search for “a third way, a way between Western ideas and Chinese traditional culture” (p. 234). Marxism had arrived in China.

In addition to the chapters reviewed here, the volume contains commendable contributions by Bill Nasson on British imperial Africa; Stephen Garton on the Dominions, Ireland, and India; and Christopher Capozzola on the United States Empire. They, along with all of the other contributors, succeed in telling the history of empire primarily from the perspective of political and military elites. While the editors assert that the volume will “adopt a perspective that does justice more fully to the millions of imperial subjects called upon to defend their imperial governments’ interest,” the collection ultimately centers on these governments’ interests rather than subjects’ experiences (p. 3). The latter is more successfully addressed by another recent volume on empires and World War I edited by Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (2011).

That many successor states after 1919 became “mini-empires,” striving to manage, in a centralized fashion, the same hierarchies of national, ethnic, and religious difference as the empires they had just replaced, is an irony already well established. In a sweeping essay on the Paris Peace Conference that concludes the volume, Leonard V. Smith offers an original and thought-provoking story about new contours of empire after 1919. Wilsonianism, he argues, constituted a “the new

global imperium” in its own right. He interprets the Covenant of the League of Nations as a design for “a true ‘imperium’ of a specific notion of popular sovereignty applicable across the globe.” In it, the nineteenth-century liberal individual became the building block for postwar sovereignty. This individual constituted the “self” in “self-determination.” In a newly conceived international system, “‘world government’ would thus exist at the level of the individual, through a global community of commensurable, self-sovereign citizens” (p. 261). This imagined, futuristic empire was more ambitious, far-reaching, and fantastical than any of the others in the volume.

#### Notes

[1]. Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin, 2004), 148-150.

[2]. Charles Maier, *Among Empires: America’s Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 31.

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