



Dina Gusejnova. *European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917-1957.* New Studies in European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-12062-4.

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European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917-1957 is more narrowly focused than its title suggests. This is not a book about European elites generally speaking or about empire broadly construed, rather it addresses a group of mainly German-speaking elites from the former Austro-Hungarian, Wilhelmine, and Romanov empires—all of them men—and examines how their ideas about Europe’s future were shaped by their imperial backgrounds. Dina Gusejnova’s book is a kind of intellectual history of a “now forgotten elite community of imperial internationalists from the Baltic lands” and other Germanic-speaking areas of eastern Europe who after World War I constituted, as Gusejnova would have it, an elite diaspora (pp. 141-142). In a sense, the book reverses Peter Gay’s take in his now classic *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968) by examining the fate of insiders who, after 1918, were outsiders. The men at the center of *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* found themselves adrift after the war in an era marked by multiplying international frontiers and fierce integral nationalism. They spoke and wrote to each other in the Continent’s lingua francas—German, English, French—and felt at home not in one nation, or even necessarily in the land of their birth, but in “Europe.” Their thinking was not “imperialistic” but “imperial” in that they had been born and raised in a cos-

mopolitan world of empires, one that disappeared after 1918. That the book’s focus is continental empire is evidenced by the fact that essential works on post-World War I German dreams of overseas colonialism do not appear in the bibliography (for instance, Wolfe Schmokel’s *Dream of Empire: German Colonialism, 1919-1945* [1964]).

Gusejnova uses, albeit sporadically, tools of analysis drawn from anthropology, linguistics, literary analysis, and semiotics, but overall the book’s methods are those of biography and intellectual history. There are just a handful of thinkers of noble background at the center of the book’s analysis: Count Harry Kessler, Count Hermann Keyserling, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, Baron Hans-Hasson von Veltheim, and Baron Mikhail Taube. Other figures playing lesser roles include (in an early section on the “celebrity of decline before Franz Ferdinand”) Ferdinand Maximilian of Habsburg (better known as Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico), Alfred Rosenberg, and Prince Karl Anton Rohan. As this list suggests, the book tells a story about men, a fact that remains unexamined even when women made up half the aristocracy, although the book’s conclusion recognizes that the “matrilineal lineage of imperial memory is yet to be told” (p. 241). While historians have treated these men as individual eccentrics, *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* con-

siders them as a group, even if their thinking did not cohere into one view on European unity. The bulk of the text is taken up by an examination of these nobles' lives, their writings, and their intellectual activities including organizing conferences, publishing, and engaging in discussions with their peers in person or by mail. Gusejnova emphasizes the cross-imperial connections of this German-speaking elite and the commonality of views among its members, thereby successfully reconstituting the postwar mental world of these men and their cosmopolitan visions of pan-European cooperation rooted in "imperial nostalgia" (p. 80).

One of the book's main subjects is Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, who made sense of postwar imperial decline by advocating for a federation of states or a federal European state, a kind of successor to the Holy Roman Empire or the post-Napoleonic German Confederation. Coudenhove-Kalergi became a proponent of a pan-European Union movement, which reflected both his thinking as it evolved after the war and his cosmopolitan upbringing, he being the son of polyglot Austro-Hungarian diplomat Heinrich Coudenhove-Kalergi and his Japanese wife Mitsuko Aoyama. Like Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, Count Hermann Keyserling looked on the postwar European situation with ideas of unity in mind, which to him could be achieved through aristocratic leadership. Born in the Russian Empire in 1880 in an area now part of Estonia, Keyserling believed that Europe existed in an "over-democratized state" after the war, and that its future "belonged to a 'supranational European idea'" (p. 127). Keyserling saw the need to create a social network among Europe's noble elites, and he organized conferences to develop European culture under the leadership of the aristocrats and intellectuals who would harness the energy of revolution and lead the Continent toward political renewal. Through the analysis of Keyserling, Coudenhove-Kalergi, and others, Gusejnova presents "a different kind of genealogy of Europe as an idea, one

which centres on forms of speech and recorded utterances" (p. 239). She succeeds in showing how these politically and temporally unmoored aristocratic elites "recycled their sense of past empires into a new concept of Europe" (p. 235).

Reconstructing someone's worldview and ideas is one thing, demonstrating that they had real effects is another, and on this latter count *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* is less persuasive. Early on Gusejnova suggests that "the old elites of continental Europe managed to convert their imperial prestige into new forms of power" after the war (p. xxii), in a kind of riff on Arno Mayer's *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (1981). But her study does not extend its analysis beyond these elites' words to show how their ideas changed things, so this statement remains unsubstantiated. The book asserts that "Aristocratic modernists like Veltheim and Keyserling played a key role as go-betweens between Europeans and non-Europeans" (p. 138). Yet it presents no evidence of European-non-European interactions to back up this claim. Gusejnova also asserts that these men's ideas and actions "shaped an entire generation" (p. 192), but because there is little in the book to show how their actions changed the course of events, or how their ideas influenced thinking beyond their narrow circles, it is hard to believe her subjects had such an impact. Later still, the book argues that the "transnational social fraction of an old imperial elite had a significant impact on the way Europeans imagined Europe in the interwar period and on the formation of the concept of a European civilization" (p. 234). The lack of evidence to demonstrate such influence, however, leaves this assertion ringing hollow.

European Elites and Ideas of Empire is based on research in a large number of archives in addition to close readings of memoirs, travelogues, and other texts by the elites who are the book's subject. The range of secondary sources is impressive, even if there are works whose absence from

the bibliography is surprising. More than once Gusejnova refers to differences and affinities between Prussians and the British, all ultimately fractured by World War I, yet she makes no reference to Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (1980). She discusses postwar experiments by elites with the occult but apparently did not consult Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), a landmark of European cultural history that includes an entire chapter on post-World War I spiritualism, séances, religion, and superstition.

The book has some other weaknesses. Gusejnova is writing in what for her must be a second if not third language, and in that sense this book is a major achievement. All the same, the prose is sometimes clunky, and the book's ideas do not always follow logically from one to the next. The index is incomplete, and the text is hampered throughout by spelling errors (for example, "*Révue*" instead of "*Revue*," p. 157; "Perpetual Peace or Perpertual War?," p. 153; "Schlarship," p. 116n38), as well as mistranslations (the French "*jours*" to "hours," p. 167). Perhaps most concerning in an era when historical writing on empire takes a wider, decidedly more global view, *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* suffers from Eurocentrism. It is unfair to criticize a work for not doing something that it does not claim to do, and Gusejnova's analysis is indeed focused on Europe. Yet the book's title, its analysis of "globetrotting" aristocrats, and its claims that elites developed "an internationalist mentality," or that others viewed the Baltic as "a global borderland," means that her analysis does assume a certain global ambit (pp. 35, xxv). In contrast, the book's Eurocentrism is revealed in a number of telling statements, such as the following observation about early twentieth-century overseas colonialism: "Calls for national self-determination and home rule reached as far as the telegraph cables and the imperial liners" (p. xxviii); evidently Gusejnova presumes that a desire for independence originat-

ed in Europe and spread outward. The last three years of Maximilian of Habsburg's life, when he ruled as Maximilian I of Mexico, was "a short episode in the international history of Europe and the United States," but not of Mexico, apparently (p. 15). Although Gusejnova references Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson's recent work connecting the history of European unification to colonial rule in Africa (*Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* [2014]), there is no discussion of this history.

What is more, the book includes several strange declarations, errors, and dubious assertions. Without explanation, Gusejnova characterizes Christopher Columbus as a "transatlantic celebrity of decline" when she states that "Maximilian [of Mexico] became Europe's first inter-imperial and transatlantic celebrity of decline since Christopher Columbus's accidental discovery of America." The author then asserts Columbus's voyage was a "Habsburg enterprise," even though the Habsburgs did not rule in the Iberian Peninsula or the Americas until at least the early 1500s (p. 19). The book describes intertextual nuances in correspondence among Baltic nobles as "a kind of 'elite subalternism'" (p. 168), an oxymoron because this was correspondence among literate, "connected" elites that was recorded and preserved in various archives.[1] The book's focus on aristocratic families leads to the claim that "a popular desire to discredit these elites was the most visible effect of the war on post-war Europe" (p. xxx); any such wish to discredit these men pales in comparison to World War I's other visible outcomes, including massive destruction in northern France, a drastically redrawn map of Europe, and millions of dead and wounded.

Gusejnova's study nonetheless makes valuable contributions. We need to understand historical actors on their own terms, to remind us that all history is not just prelude to the present but also encompasses dead-ends and paths not taken. *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* has much to

say about post-World War I elite attitudes toward the downfall of continental empires and postwar identity among German-speaking European elites. Rather than retreat into lives of resentment, resignation, or quiet dissolution, these men coped with the trauma of empire's end not only by reenvisioning European "imperial" units but also by taking steps, whatever their results, to make it happen. What is more, for many years European history was written with too much attention paid to the Continent's western states, something that has changed with studies like Tony Judt's momentous *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (2005), which reorients history writing toward a more comprehensive "Europe." *European Elites and Ideas of Empire* continues in this vein by unearthing Germanic elites' postwar attempts at pan-European cooperation. Even if these figures had less impact than Gusejnova claims, her study reveals a fascinating and distinctly eastern European branch of the intellectual genealogy of European unification.

Note

[1]. Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1475-1490.

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