

**Ulrike von Hirschhausen, Jörg Leonhard, Empires.  
Eine globale Geschichte 1780–1920, München  
(C. H. Beck) 2023, 736 S., 44 Abb. farb., ISBN  
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This is a well-written book of great erudition. Several books offering broad conceptual overviews of empires have appeared since the 1990s, when colonial studies began to take their current form. This book is unlike those others. It rejects typologizing as a tool for comprehending imperial rule; instead, von Hirschhausen and Leonhard argue for strong basic similarities among empires. It also rejects vast timelines, focusing only on the long nineteenth century through the First World War. Those bookends of eighteenth century revolutions and what that war unleashed suit the authors' focus on nationalist challenges to empires. The book makes its case through dozens of biographical narratives of individuals, some well-known (e.g. Pandita Ramabai, Mohandas Gandhi, Blaise Diagne) and others less so (Semën Semënovich Atarshchikov of the Caucasus, Bib Doda of Albania, Gustav and Louisa Kronfeld of New Zealand). There are high-level overviews, statistics, and good maps, but those individuals' stories are what bring the book's arguments to life. Each of the 22 chapters uses a common, compact structure: after a brief thematic introduction, a section narrates a detailed example drawn from one location, then the next one adds another example from a quite different location. Then comes the part that sums up how those examples illustrated the theme in question and layers on a third example, before a concluding section offers some comparative observations. Yet more, briefer illustrative examples are sprinkled throughout, creating a rich array of narratives that are closely tied to that chapter's theme and the authors' specific argument about it. In spite of its length, it is a page-turner. However, it may not be very successful as a teaching aid at university due to its length (over 600 pages). That is too bad, as students would enjoy reading this one, and it is to be hoped that it will be translated into English. Finally, the book uses examples of subjection to imperial rule from within Europe alongside those from Africa and Asia, without commenting on the decision to do so. This is an effective technique for creating a non-Eurocentric account that does not present imperial and colonial hierarchies as something linked historically only to Asia and Africa. The Ottoman, Habsburg, British, and Russian empires get the most space overall. Some important examples are drawn from the French and German colonial empires. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Belgian, and Japanese empires are mentioned more briefly.

Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper sum up empire as a matter of »governing different people differently« (*Empires in World History* [2010], 184). Von Hirschhausen and Leonhard likewise tell us



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that »ethnic variety« (»ethnische Vielfalt«) is the »fundamental characteristic« (»grundlegendes Kennzeichen«) of empire (13). They define ethnicity in terms of strategic action: as »a broad repertoire« (»ein breites Repertoire«) whose »decisive characteristic consisted in mobilizing and politicizing groups in contexts of cultural diversity« (»entscheidendes Kennzeichen bestand darin, Gruppen in Situationen kultureller Vielfalt zu mobilisieren und zu politisieren«) (18). A long-standing cultural element comes to the fore as the newly decisive criterion of belonging – possibly with life-or-death consequences. Ethnicization was sometimes an existing social reality and sometimes a recent, intentional creation. In either case, rulers instrumentalized ethnicity in order to bolster control, and the people they targeted responded. Ethnicization (of the economy, the military, the labor force, labor organizing, etc.) had effects that sooner or later outran actors' intentions. Von Hirschhausen and Leonhard demonstrate these processes across five fields of action: »conquering and developing infrastructure« (»erobern und erschliessen«), »ruling and negotiating« (»herrschen und verhandeln«), »believing and representing« (»glauben und repräsentieren«), »prospering and profiting« (»prosperieren und profitieren«), and »fighting and defending« (»kämpfen und verteidigen«).

Studded among the extensive empirical material are a number of interventions the authors wish to make. Above all, von Hirschhausen and Leonhard want to draw attention to the agency of people living under imperial rule. They want the reader to think in terms of people in specific places responding to the situations before them, rather than in terms of policies issued in distant capitals or abstract concepts. Postcolonial approaches, they claim, have exaggerated the power of imperial rulers and homogenized the colonial encounter into a too simple, two-sided scenario: all-powerful colonizers against the colonized united in profound oppression (61, 149). I am not sure that is a valid generalization about the scholarly literature, but they present agency and widely distributed forms of power well. Most of the portrayed individuals were intermediaries of some kind between imperial rulers and the populations those rulers sought to subject. Their stories remind us of the immense diversity of origins and statuses of people inhabiting the lands claimed by empires. (Intermediaries don't necessarily represent that diversity however; the vast majority lived by subsistence production or waged labor, but they are not individually portrayed.) These intermediaries were geographically mobile, had options, and exploited inter-imperial rivalries as they subverted rulers' schemes for taxation or military recruitment, for example. Some came from very humble backgrounds and were socially mobile, making and losing careers and fortunes as ethnicization worked for or against them. Their typically high degree of assimilation to imperial ways should not be read as an absence of criticism of imperial rule, nor should anti-imperial rebellion be assumed to reflect uniformity of opinion in those ranks about nationalist politics. There could be many reasons to obey or disobey, and these shifted as situations changed. Indeed, »situational« (»situativ«) is the authors' favorite word.



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They want readers to appreciate the »often unplanned dynamic« of empire in »its overall contradictoriness« (»häufig ungeplanten Dynamik und ihrer ganzen Widersprüchlichkeit«) (150). They want us to attend to the variety of outcomes and reject assumptions of inevitability. They point out an overall trend toward colonial wars embracing the goal of destruction as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, yet settler colonialism ought not be assumed to be genocidal. Rather, there were divergent outcomes of settler colonialism that can be explained by factors specific to that instance (60). They do not minimize the violence of empire, but they claim that bringing forward stories of cooperation and cultural assimilation in the context of ongoing strategic decisions by all parties brings us a truer account of nineteenth century empire.

Von Hirschhausen and Leonhard seek to present the »perspective of the subjected, colonized, and ruled«, »how these actors on the spot reacted to imperial tools of rule and strategies«, and how »they were sometimes able to transform these into opportunities for action and where the limits of such developments became visible« (»Perspektive der Untertanen, Kolonisierten und Beherrschten; wie diese Akteure vor Ort auf imperiale Herrschaftsinstrumente und Strategien reagierten; diese womöglich in eigene Handlungschancen umwandelten und wo die Grenzen solcher Entwicklungen sichtbar wurden«) (13). The other side of the same coin is to present the many barriers that imperial rulers faced, and the authors do this too. To intensify rule was, paradoxically, to blur boundaries between colonizer and colonized more; increased taxation led to increased evasion and increased demands for political rights; infrastructural achievements like the Suez Canal or Hejaz Railway became liabilities when workers or ethnicized groups staged globally visible actions there. This book skillfully shows us the dynamism and contingency of modern empires. As for whether short-term power could be parlayed into lasting strength over the longer term – well, we are still living in the longer term. Their richly informative, impressively executed book deserves a wide readership.



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