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Transimperial History –
Connectivity, Cooperation and
Competition

The field of imperial history has been booming for quite a while. This we owe to innovative approaches that have breathed new life into the field, such as postcolonial studies, the «new imperial history» and global history. As a result, in the past two decades imperial history has definitely become broader and deeper in scope. This diversity is reflected in the range of current interpretations: from sleepwalking, absent-minded or even helpless imperialists to the emphasis on the omnipresence and the everydayness of human imperial experience and the legacy of imperial rule.

However, the better part of more recent work has made use of one particular approach. These studies have adapted the idea, postulated by Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, to bring the colonizer and the colonized, the colony and the metropole «into one analytic field».¹ This innovative approach has provided us with thrilling insights, but it has also exhibited a notable side effect. The discussion has focussed on intra-imperial processes, and most often the research has been national-imperial by design. In recent decades, transnational and global history approaches have deconstructed the nation and pointed to its fluid boundaries. The colonies often served as an analytical means to do so. In this regard, it proved quite useful to turn to the history of the national empires. However, the history of empires beyond the nation has remained remarkably neglected because similar methods were not used systematically to transcend empires. The paradoxical effect has been that empires have often ended up being nationalized. In other words: whereas national history has been transnationalized in recent decades, the history of empires has, by and large, remained nationalized.

Therefore, a turn in empire studies is needed, one which we would like to label transimperial. The moment seems to have come for such a shift, since transnational history, global history, postcolonial studies, and new imperial history all offer an abundance of tools to tear down imperial borders and deconstruct nationalized narra-

1 F.Cooper/A.L.Stoler, «Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda», in idem

(eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley et al. 1997, 1–56, 15.

tives. Furthermore, on an empirical level, work that compares several empires or considers interaction between them has become more prominent lately. In this context, the aim of this contribution is to push the boundaries of writing imperial history and tease out the possibilities and challenges of a transimperial approach.

A transimperial approach would make it possible to dynamize and decentralize the history of empires both on the level of empirical research and historiographical narratives. It would do so, by overcoming the Eurocentrism that still haunts imperial history. What do we mean by this? Apart from dominating nationalized perspectives, the booming field is biased first and foremost by the history of the British Empire. There are several reasons for this. One is that new imperial history was mostly an intervention of British and American historians.² Another is that the sheer size of the British Empire from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century may somehow justify its dominant position in historiography. In short, the British Empire has been and still is the big elephant in the room, a creature whose mighty appearance runs the risk of pushing others around and leaving little space for them. Thus, a transimperial approach would not only give non-European empires – such as the Ottoman, the Chinese or Japanese – more space, it would also incorporate those European empires that have been marginalized, like the Italian or Portuguese empires during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this sense, the first contribution of transimperial history would be to address Eurocentric and Anglocentric tendencies in imperial history simultaneously.

It would do so mainly by bringing different kinds of empires «into one analytic field». This is not an entirely new agenda, as the word choice shows. Rather, it draws attention to points that others have made much earlier. However, it seems to us that the potential for critical innovation has not been fully exhausted. With a transimperial approach, we assume, for one, that the narrative of the British Empire as the all-defining model for all others will be challenged. For another, narratives for each empire will change for they will appear less unique.

In order to methodologically decentralize and dynamize empire studies, a transimperial approach seeks to discuss imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as entangled processes. The point is not to analytically isolate cooperation or competition but to shed light on how they reinforced each other and how connectivity plays into this. As we will show, one key to establishing a transimperial approach is to consider time and space together by focusing on the transformative aspect of competition, cooperation and connectivity. We do not seek to celebrate connections and detect and localize transimperial cooperation by all means, but rather to use a transimperial perspective as a point of departure for opening up new scales, both in terms of space and time. Thus, what

2 S. Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, London, New York 2010, 2.

we propose is to understand a transimperial approach less as an end than as a means to rewrite the histories of empires. Furthermore, decentring imperial history means that we include the grassroots level across empires, including the colonized. In this sense, a transimperial approach not only helps deal with networks of colonial personnel or armchair scholars seated in the metropolises, it also enables us, for instance, to see how transimperial anti-imperialism played a part in shaping imperial encounters, conflicts and interplay.

In the following, we will first discuss the term «transimperial». Then we present the state of research by discussing the revival of imperial history in connection with postcolonial theory and the new imperial history. Such research has often already provided us with transimperial histories *avant la lettre*, on which an explicit transimperial approach can rely. In a third section, we will further elaborate our take on transimperial history because what is still missing is a theoretical-methodological framework with which to address the spaces in-between empires, their connectivity, cooperation and competition. In a fourth and final section, we conclude by showing a way how a transimperial approach can challenge existing master narratives in empire studies.

1. A New Term for the Next Turn?

To push the boundaries of writing imperial history and to overcome national confinements in empire studies could turn out to be quite a task. For a start, we would welcome a new term to label the endeavour. For us, transimperial is the obvious candidate for a couple of reasons. First, the term is rarely used, which means that it is therefore barely occupied and far from fixed in a methodological sense. There are numbers to support the claim that the term is a rather fresh one: it has only been in the last few years that «trans-imperial»/«transimperial» has started to pop up in scholarly literature. About half of the hits for the term on *Worldcat* are products of the last three years. At the same time, the findings are still few and far between. At the moment, *Worldcat* only registers around 200 hits for the term. To put this into perspective: well over 200,000 entries pop up for «transnational». The transimperial/transnational ratio might not always be 1 to 1000, but such numbers strongly suggest that the boom in transnational history has not yet been replicated by a trans-imperial one.

Until now, transimperial has most often been used *en passant*, especially to refer to imperial connections or cooperation. Overall, there is little methodological or theoretical engagement with the term. One notable exception is Ella Natalie Rothman's work on «trans-imperial subjects between Venice and Istanbul» in the early modern Mediterranean world.³ It is striking that both her work and the recent work of others

3 E.N. Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*, Ithaca, NY, London 2012.

who make more explicit use of the term deal predominately with the Early Modern era.⁴ But in imperial histories dealing with the past 200 years, the transimperial dimension seems blurred or usually altogether absent. Both the rarity and fuzziness of the term itself is underlined by the fact that it is most often written with a hyphen, whereas the term transnational exudes far more self-confidence by dismissing with such punctuation, thereby demonstrating that it is well established. Thus, we would suggest that the spelling «transimperial» be used in order to help normalize the term and raise it to eye level with transnational.

With regard to the choice of a term, other questions arise as we press forward. What difference does it make to use the prefix *trans* instead of *inter*? And why insist on «imperial» instead of «colonial»? To answer the first question, let us draw an analogy to the notion of international history, in which interimperial would refer first and foremost to a connection between two (or more) polities and would thereby discuss geographical entities, which are conventionally imagined as separate empire-states. As we have seen with the pairing of transnational and international, transimperial becomes more than just a substitute for interimperial. And as was the case with transnational history, such an approach connects easier with recent trends in historiography. At the same time, *trans-* also shifts the focus much more to spaces *in-between* and *beyond* empires. It has the potential to cross imperial boundaries and dislocate the centres. When it comes to actors who move across empires, the prefix *trans-* refers to ties across imperial frontiers, dual residencies or migration through multiple locales. It thereby refers to the agency of actors who feel at home in multiple imperial settings. It also enables us to incorporate spatial configurations as well as the factor of time when we analyse the interplay of connections, cooperation and competition. In this sense, the *trans* transforms. However, research has shown that transnational approaches do not necessarily want the nation to disappear. On the contrary, they often just present national history and nation building in a new light.⁵ We would like to take the same stance in relation to empire and propose using its transformative potential for imperial history.

Now let us turn to the use of «colonial» versus «imperial». As *en vogue* as empire studies have been recently, it should be remembered that the meaning of the term and its ubiquitous use have also been just as contested. It certainly does not help solve the problem to water down the term «empire» and use it to describe big businesses or metaphorically almost every kind of power relation. With reference to Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, we understand empires as «large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain

4 P. Brummett, «Mapping Trans-Imperial Ottoman Space. Alterity and Attraction», in B. Fuchs / E. Weissbourd (eds.), *Representing Imperial Rivalry in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Toronto 2015, 33–57; E. Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies*

and *New Granada's Transimperial. Greater Caribbean World*, Durham 2016.

5 S. Conrad, *Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge 2010.

distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people».⁶ Transimperial history allows us to look at histories between, across and beyond these large political units.

Often, the terms colonial or imperial and colonialism or imperialism are used almost interchangeably. However, there are some crucial distinctions, as Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out. For him, imperialism is in some respects the term with the most comprehensive meaning, making colonialism appear almost as a special case. The term colonies connects to peripheries, to settler colonialism and to the colonization of lands. In contrast, imperialism is stronger in its connection to the political unit in the centre.⁷ Only by using the term transimperial do we then grasp the complicated relationships between the metropolises and the colonies, both within each empire and between empires, and how these are related to the power game being played out by competing empires.

One last point: a transimperial approach enables us to grasp European expansion as a shared project. To be more precise, empires had similar «politics of comparison» in common, be it to cooperate with or combat against one other. A transimperial approach should thus insist that imperialism emerged first and foremost as transimperial imperialism. Empirical research has already addressed some of these aspects, and it is those histories, mostly transimperial *avant la lettre*, to which we now turn our attention.

2. The State of the Art or Transimperial Histories *avant la lettre*

Not too long ago, in the final days of the second millennium, the future of imperial history looked bleak. The field was seen as «fusty, hidebound, backward-looking».⁸ For those who were (still) engaged in such research, the crisis of the history of imperialism had threatening implications because the visibility of historians of empire seemed to have diminished significantly: «Once they occupied a prominent and respected position in the discipline; today, they no longer have a station above their ideas», concluded Antony G. Hopkins in 1999.⁹ Little wonder that the obstacles to preparing a fresh agenda for imperial history seemed rather intimidating at the time.

The last decade of the second millennium also brought us the idea that humanity had reached the end of history.¹⁰ It was the victory of Western liberal democracy over communism and the end of the Cold War that lent the idea a degree of plausibility. Today it is obvious that it was history's refusal to end once and for all that marked the beginning of imperial history's astonishing renaissance. Especially the 9/11 terrorist attack and the subsequent US invasion in Iraq reinforced the impres-

6 J. Burbank / F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Oxford 2010, 8.

7 J. Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus: Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*, Munich 1997, 26–28.

8 Howe, *Imperial Histories Reader*, 1.

9 A. G. Hopkins, «Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History», in: *Past & Present* 164 (1999), 198–243, 198.

10 F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London 1992.

sion that the Age of Empire might not yet be over. In the wake of Bush's war on terror, the question arose about the existence of an American Empire in the twentieth century and its perpetuation in the new one.¹¹ This sparked an interest in the recent history of empires in general. Odd Arne Westad, for example, reframed the Cold War as a global conflict between a US «empire of liberty» and a Soviet «empire of justice».¹²

A few years down the road, as the world watched the rise of China and the failure(s) of a Pax Americana, the questions of geopolitics and the pursuit of world order re-emerged and mingled with the discussion of imperialism's renaissance. At the same time, a new, accelerating phase of globalization contributed its part to the interest in empire. As national borders were redrawn and national narratives rewritten, the imperial world of the late nineteenth century – shaped by transcontinental entanglements, multi-ethnic empires and global inequalities – no longer seemed so remote.

Against this backdrop, imperial history rose at the beginning of the new millennium like a phoenix out of the ashes. However, a closer look shows that the revival of imperial history was not solely the result of changes in the political global landscape after the year of 2000. Instead, the basis for the resurgence of imperial history has already been laid in the 1990s when empire studies started to be influenced by innovative research agendas, known by terms like the discursive turn, the cultural turn, the postcolonial turn, the spatial turn and the transnational turn. In this sense, what is now described as a veritable imperial turn in historiography is firmly based on other, previous ones. Thus, at the moment when the swansong on the passing of imperial history was intoned, the field – which had largely focused on politics and economics – was fundamentally transformed by conceptual innovation coming from its margins.¹³ To flag the realignment imperial history was labelled «new».¹⁴ And indeed, there truly were new beginnings. New imperial history was intrinsically interdisciplinary in focus, ranging from literary and gender studies to history and psychoanalysis. In early works that claimed explicitly to represent a new imperial history, the focus was first and foremost on the Atlantic world and Great Britain.

All in all, the results were quite striking. On the one hand, the term «empire» seems ubiquitous today, even in fields generally not attributed to imperial history. Geoff Eley, for example, contends that «American studies programs have become entirely suffused with recognitions of empire's importance».¹⁵

11 A.J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, Cambridge, MA, London 2002; R.H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz*, Princeton, Oxford 2010.

12 O.A. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*, Cambridge 2005.

13 Especially Cooper / Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.

14 K. Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660 – 1840*, Cambridge, New York 2004.

15 G. Eley, «Empire by Land or Sea? Germany's Imperial Imaginary, 1840–1945», in: B. Naranch / G. Eley (eds.), *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, Durham 2014, 19–45, 25.

On the other hand, we now know much more about the diversity and complexities of colonial rule, because the cultural turn and postcolonial studies have broadened our understanding of the effects of colonialism. Such studies also point to the long afterlife and legacies of colonialism. In the tradition of postcolonial theory, a field then developed that was simultaneously political and critical. This is all the more remarkable because the politicization of academia was generally diminishing at the time.

However, despite the widespread delight over the revival of imperial history, this triumph triggered a series of problems. On the one hand, as we have seen, the British and their lost empire dominated the debates. On the other hand, many who engaged in the renewal of imperial history did not subscribe to the theoretical premises of the new imperial history; some even openly rejected them. And finally, as diverse and ubiquitous as imperial history might have become, some actors, topics and empires remain underrepresented. There is, generally speaking, a focus on European empires as such. Furthermore, with a few noteworthy exceptions, studies tend to deal with each empire separately.¹⁶ The bottom line still is to ask how the empire influences the nation, its identity and nation-building process. Lately, this state of research has been criticized.¹⁷ In this context, more multifaceted approaches have developed that include and compare several empires; many of them are dealing with some kind of transimperial history.

There is a long tradition of comparing empires. One could easily claim that this had become common practice at least by the late nineteenth century. Already then, the mighty British Empire was used as the yardstick against which others were judged. Thereafter, in the painful decades of decolonization following the Second World War, the question on the table was whether some European nations had relinquished their empires more easily and fairly than others had, and if so, whether or not this was due to fundamental differences in their ideas and practices of colonial rule. Such discussions were comparative by nature, but here the act of comparing was first and foremost a means to claim national peculiarities and to reinforce national stereotypes. One of the fiercest – and, by the way, longest – controversies took place between British and French historians. The British side contrasted their «informal» empire, based on free trade and indirect rule, with an interpretation of

16 Some exceptions are: J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*, London 2007; Burbank, *Empires in World History*; W. Reinhard, *Die Unterwerfung der Welt. Eine Globalgeschichte der europäischen Expansion 1415–2015*, Munich 2016; A. Ballantyne / A. Burton, «Empires and the Reach of the Global», in: E. S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*, London, Cambridge, MA 2012, 285–431.

17 U. von Hirschhausen, «A New Imperial History?

Programm, Potenzial, Perspektiven», in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41 (2015) 4, 718–757, 738; V. Barth / R. Cvetkovski, «Introduction: Encounters of Empires. Methodological Approaches», in: idem (eds.), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870–1930: Empires and Encounters*, London, New York 2015, 3–33, 4; B. Stuchey, «Zeitgeschichte und vergleichende Imperien Geschichte. Voraussetzungen und Wendepunkte in ihrer Beziehung», in: *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 65 (2017) 3, 301–337, 303–304.

French colonialism as being highly administrative, aimed at assimilation and in the end far more violent.¹⁸ Several problems plagued such comparative approaches. On the one hand, comparison often served as a means to rehabilitate the honour of the nation in the face of the bloody business of its former empire building. On the other hand, this kind of comparative imperial historiography also focused primarily on political and economic issues.

Alongside the new imperial history came calls for a more critical perspective in the business of comparing empires. At the beginning of the new millennium, Ann Laura Stoler, for example, was already asking «for more reflection on the history and politics of comparison, on the importance of doing a certain kind of comparative cultural history» and thereby urging «attention to practices of colonial comparison by colonial governments themselves».¹⁹ From this perspective, it becomes obvious that empires never existed in isolation but actively compared themselves to one another and that the politics of comparison is best understood as an integral component of colonial rule.²⁰ Recently Satoshi Mizutani has shown how such an imperial history could look. He proposed to widen the scope of Ann Laura Stoler's concept of «politics of comparison» to include comparisons used not just by the colonizer but also by the colonized, and named it «anti-colonial politics of comparison».²¹

Comparative approaches have been used in a more systematic and critical way in recent years. In this context, the Eastern European empires of the long nineteenth century have been one focal point. Given the pronounced multi-ethnicity of these empires, practices of colonial rule and the complex relationship between empires and nation-state building have been one focus of attention in the discussion.²² Such work has changed our view of Eastern Europe before 1914 as our understanding of those multi-ethnic empires has been altered. No longer are they simply seen as failed states or anachronistic «prisons of nations», the eradication of which had long been interpreted as the logical outcome of history.

However, the comparison of empires is still far from common practice – all the more so if one looks for comparisons between European and non-European empires.

18 For an overview of the debate, see V. Dimier, «Direct or Indirect Rule: Propaganda around a Scientific Controversy», in: T. Chafer / A. Sackur, *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, Basingstoke, New York 2002, 168–183. See also: M. Thomas / R. Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956*, Oxford 2017.

19 A. L. Stoler, «Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)Colonial Studies», in: *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001) 3, 829–865, 831.

20 See e.g. S. Coghe, «Inter-imperial Learning and African Health Care in Portuguese Angola in the

Interwar Period», *Social History of Medicine* 28 (2015) 1: 134–154. See also: J. Hart, *Comparing Empires: European Colonialism from Portuguese Expansion to the Spanish-American War*, New York, Basingstoke 2003.

21 See M. Räther, «Tagungsbericht. In-Between Empires. Trans-imperial History in a Global Age, 15.9.2017–16.9.2017 Berlin», in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 19.2.2018, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7560>.

22 J. Leonhard / U. von Hirschhausen (eds.), *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Göttingen 2011.

Furthermore, the comparative approach is faced with another challenge. Because of the methodology used, this approach tends to leave out movements and intersections between empires while focusing on static structures. Hence, there always lurks the danger of reinforcing national stereotypes instead of questioning them. In this sense, systematic comparative approaches are not transimperial in nature. In contrast, transimperial history would put more emphasis on transfers and interactions among empires. One interesting approach seems to be the study of «colonial encounters».²³ Thus, a way out methodologically could be to turn to the insights of *histoire croisée*, which claimed to leave behind static models and a-priori defined categories and thereby not to play out comparisons and transfers but to combine them.²⁴

Lately, the connection between imperial cooperation and transfer has been more systematically explored. For instance, Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski have pointed out that, even though rivalry and opposition were a crucial part of imperialism, we should turn our attention to the «multiple collaboration between empires». Therefore, they have proposed that we search for mutual transfers and exchanges and thereby shift our focus to «inter-imperial encounters».²⁵ The question about how to grasp the phenomenon of collaboration between the colonizers and the colonized has preoccupied researchers for decades.²⁶ A transimperial perspective would take up these topics and at the same time broaden the scope by inquiring into the cooperation between several empires. To frame this kind of interaction, the recently proposed terms «co-imperialism» and «co-imperialists» might be useful.²⁷ All this could be part of a transimperial history, which in turn could help handle two possible pitfalls of an approach that focuses all too one-sidedly on cooperation. First, a history focusing on interimperial cooperation and transfer might run the risk of reinforcing the primacy of the colonizers and their actions, leaving little room for the colonized and their agency. Second, the focus on collaboration in the imperial field could play down imperial competition, which was never absent among the Great Powers.

By turning away from the Great Powers' game to the grassroots level of colonial rule, a growing body of scholarship dealing with various actors provides us with an empirical basis for conceptual synthesis.²⁸ Some scholars point to transimperial networks of actors. One example is Ella Natalie Rothman, who studies transimperial

23 U. Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen. Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914*, Frankfurt am Main 2011.

24 M. Werner / B. Zimmermann, «Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der *Histoire croisée* und die Herausforderungen des Transnationalen», in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002) 4, 607–636.

25 Barth / Cvetkovski, «Introduction», 3.

26 R. Robinson, «Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Col-

laboration», in: R. Owen and R. B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, London 1972, 117–142; T. Bührer et al. (eds.), *Cooperation and Empire: Local Realities of Global Processes*, New York, Oxford 2017.

27 Thomas, *Arguing about Empire*, 10.

28 See e.g. F. Prado, *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Río de la Plata*, Oakland, CA 2015; A. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, & the Globaliza-*

subjects by tracing their role in several settings and the way they defined and were defined by different notions of foreign and local, East and West or other designations such as Muslim and Christian.²⁹ She thereby addresses questions of identity-building, social mobility and belonging, with an emphasis on the economic sphere, and she does this by focusing on the figure of the culture broker.

Brokers or intermediaries are also crucial figures in the scholarship dealing with the production of colonial knowledge, which is seen as being integral and constitutive for imperial rule.³⁰ Discussions focusing on the production of «colonial knowledge» by specifically analysing hegemonic dimensions of knowledge in the colonial context include a broad range of different methodological approaches and themes.³¹ Some studies discuss the overlap between knowledge and colonial rule in broader contexts and contribute to our understanding of why and how imperial rule functioned and how science and colonial knowledge were key for the implementation as well as the durability of empires.³² Others draw on particular scientific disciplines and show how they both formed and have been formed by colonial knowledge.³³

For quite some time, scholars have observed that colonial knowledge was produced across imperial centres. In this vein, scholars such as Kapil Raj challenged the notion of unilateral knowledge transfers by using the concept of circulation instead.³⁴ Studies have also shown how to overcome dichotomies such as West–East, centre–periphery or users–producers of knowledge.³⁵ Others emphasize specific practices and share the assumption that we have to look at the situatedness of knowledge production. Much research in the history of science has shown how knowledge was co-produced, contrary to the claims that Europeans produced new scientific understanding about overseas regions out of thin air. Researchers have traced how knowledge is generated by physical practices and produced in specific places such as «contact zones», places of permanent intercultural interaction between the colonizers and the colonized.³⁶

- tion of the New South*, Princeton, Oxford 2010; T. Graf, *The Sultan's Renegades: Christian-European Converts to Islam and the Making of the Ottoman Elite, 1575–1610*, Oxford 2017.
- 29 Rothman, *Brokering Empire*, 3.
- 30 S. Schaffer et al. (eds.), *The Brokered World: Go-betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820*, Sagamore Beach, MA 2009.
- 31 For a discussion of the literature see: T. Ballantyne, «Colonial Knowledge», in: S. E. Stockwell (ed.), *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, Malden, MA 2008, 177–198.
- 32 B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton, NJ 1996; C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge 1996.
- 33 D. Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India (The New Cambridge History of India)*, Cambridge 2000; W. U. Eckart (ed.), *Man, Medicine, and the State: The Human Body as an Object of Government Sponsored Medical Research in the 20th Century*, Stuttgart 2006.
- 34 K. Raj, «Beyond Postcolonialism ... and Postpositivism: Circulation and the Global History of Science», in: *Isis* 104 (2013) 2, 337–347.
- 35 D. Raina, «From West to Non-West? Basalla's Three-Stage Model Revisited», in: *Science as Culture* 8 (1999) 4, 497–516.
- 36 Schaffer, *The Brokered World*; M. von Brescius, *German Science in the Age of Empire: Enterprise, Opportunity and the Schlagintweit Brothers*, Cambridge (forthcoming) 2019.

Studies on the question of colonial knowledge that include multiple empires might still be in the minority, but Stoler and Cooper's question about «collective imperial knowledge, shared among colonising powers», is now treated much more systematically and regularly than when this question was first posed in 1997.³⁷ One of the ideas many of these scholars share is the concept of a colonial or imperial archive.³⁸ Colonial archives generally have been defined as containing bodies of knowledge available as a tool for colonial rule and for governing and exploiting the colonized. Reading and deconstructing such archives along the lines of Michel Foucault thus makes the power structure of imperialism understandable and thereby vincible.

Lately another concept has been proposed: the imperial cloud.³⁹ Situated in recent scholarship on circulation, the concept of an imperial cloud aims to complement «classical transfer studies focusing on rather clear-cut two-sided exchanges by offering a way to think about more diffused ways in which imperial knowledge proliferated». ⁴⁰ Through this concept, Jonas Kreienbaum and Christoph Kamissek make the intriguing point that an imperial cloud, as they perceive it, is not located physically at a specific place in a single empire but is shared by many, which means that access to it cannot be controlled by only one of them. All in all, the cloud serves as a model to show the extent to which the formation and constant reformation of imperial knowledge was a process involving actors across empires and thus transimperial in nature.

3. Transimperial Histories to Come

Transimperial history is about the movements of people, knowledge and goods across empires and about the formations of imperial alliances as well as anti-imperial networks and exchanges. Thus, transimperial history can be applied to both the macro and the micro level, to state or individual actors, from top down and bottom up. It is also about stretching the narrative of imperial formations and their spatial location to include a new view of spaces in-between empires such as the ocean, the skies or borderlands. Moreover, it is a tool to challenge common chronologies within empire studies. In the following, we will pinpoint the theoretical and methodological premises and possibilities of transimperial history and at the same time suggest the form this approach could take. Because it is our area of expertise, most of these examples will deal with the inclusion of the Japanese empire.

37 Cooper / Stoler, «Metropole and Colony», 13.

38 A.L.Stoler, «Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance», in: *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109.

39 J. Kreienbaum / C. Kamissek, «An Imperial Cloud?

Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge», in: *Journal of Modern European History* 14 (2016) 2, 164–182.

40 *Ibid.*, 169.

Transimperial history should serve more as a means than as an end in itself. Thus, we understand transimperial history to be first and foremost a methodological approach, one which always works within a multiperspective framework. As such, it is not an end in itself; it is instead a prerequisite for rethinking the scope and chronology of imperial history. Therefore, it is a *conditio sine qua non* for a transimperial research program to include at least two imperial players and to consider their respective perspectives. As an inherently multiperspective approach, transimperial history targets the «in-between» spaces of imperial history in particular. It is in a position to grant more space to underrepresented and marginalized points of view. In relation to the existing research landscape, in-between also means to go beyond the paths well trod. Thus, in this context the transimperial approach especially advances efforts to reposition ostensible peripheries and to decentralize empire studies as a whole.

It also takes on a comparative function similar to the one that transnational history had with regard to national history, insofar as it showed that national history neither exists in an isolated space nor can it be exhaustively explained exclusively of and by itself. This did not result in the abolishment of the nation and its history, instead it readjusted and embedded national history in global contexts. Something comparable should also be the result of a transimperial turn.

Transnational history used the colonies to deconstruct the nation. Still, the effect was somehow paradox as this often ended up in nationalizing empires. In this sense, imperial history was first and foremost a history of the nation state's extension beyond its borders.⁴¹ In the end, a transimperial perspective would challenge the privileged nation-empire link and thereby complicate any explicit or implicit depiction of a nation's imperial history as a special path.

Besides the national aspect, the potential of transimperial history lies particularly in its ability to bring about a new, deeper and more systematic contemplation of the essence of cooperation, competition and connectivity amongst empires. The aim cannot and should not be to develop a universally applicable theory of connectivity between empires. Nor does a transimperial approach enable us to make general assertions about the essence and relationship of cooperation and competition among empires that are detached from specific historical situations. Cooperation, competition and connectivity are not mutually exclusive; instead, a type of empirical field arises within the framework of their interplay. The systematic implementation of a transimperial approach would enable us to identify the density and variety of the connections between empires and thereby underscore the colonial expansion as a shared project. Such a perspective would allow us to discuss how empires claimed, in an often contradictory fashion, to be unique while at the same time they shared imperial knowledge to facilitate their colonial rule.

41 Hopkins, «Back to the Future», 203.

With regard to the question about connectivity, it is possible to turn to ideas of *histoire croisée* that postulate combining comparison and transfer. According to Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, comparative history suffers from the twofold dilemma that it operates simultaneously from within and without and insufficiently considers the historicity of its categories.⁴² In turn, approaches in transfer history are faced with the challenge of simultaneously questioning the national fixation of their categories of analysis and avoiding any one-sided celebration of transfer. Thus, *histoire croisée* proposes that definitions and all spatial and time classifications ensue from several standpoints and thereby takes into consideration various systems of reference, various languages and conceptual traditions. Should transimperial history avail itself of such an approach, then it takes a step closer to the goal of critically discussing reciprocal influence and at the same time to deconstruct the idea of empires as national, ahistorical entities.

Since any kind of *trans*-history runs the risk of celebrating and overemphasizing transfers and interactions, it would also be important to reveal interruptions, cover-ups and mechanisms of exclusion. A transimperial approach that discusses simultaneously the *three c's* offers a research design that does not necessarily adopt the competition–cooperation dichotomy. For example, from the perspective of the colonized, colonial counterinsurgency may have exhibited traits of cooperation between the various colonial powers, whereas the colonizers often saw themselves as embedded in the context of a mutually accentuated competition between forms of colonial rule. And lastly, there were many actors who operated outside all of these clearly defined groups. Sometimes they acted in opposition to and sometimes in cooperation with one side or another. Sometimes they acted on behalf of several empires and their allegiances were never clearly identifiable. One such example would be merchants, who are labelled smugglers when imperial borders change, as they did, for instance, in the seascapes of South and East Asia.

Therefore, since no generalizing and universally valid statements can be made regarding the essence of cooperation, competition and connectivity, we refer to three areas to show how a transimperial turn can dynamize empire studies. The first centres on the question of hierarchization and marginalization within and amongst empires. The second deals with the question of imperial space, and the third addresses the temporal level. This will show that transimperial history permits, in principle, synchronous and diachronic approaches.

42 Werner, «Vergleich», 616.

I. Marginalizations

As hard as we may try, somebody always is left out, forgotten or marginalized. Ann Laura Stoler reminded us of this when she recently criticized that «(post)colonial studies [...] as a field of critical scholarship» has nonetheless «produced an archive that, not unlike colonial archives themselves, is ironically selective, evasive, and problematic».⁴³ Her observation is made in connection with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and based on «the fact that Israel’s colonial profile and politics have been visible and documented for so long but not widely <recognizable> as a colonizing project»; she concludes that the fate of Palestine was therefore held at bay and relegated to the margins by (post)colonial studies.⁴⁴ One may or may not agree with the political dimension of her reading of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, the general point to be made is that the methodological-theoretical emergence of imperial history had a paradoxical outcome, the irony of which is hard to overlook. Given the high hopes that a new imperial history would open up to views from below and from without, and given the ideal of postcolonial theory to lend a voice to the colonized and to bring the subaltern to speak, such selectivity is indeed problematic, especially as critical scholarship is supposed to be measured against its standards. Currently there is also a related discussion going on about the premature death of global history, as the field finds itself accused of being little more than a «luxury trade of an elite minority» and «another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues».⁴⁵ Against this backdrop, transimperial approaches, which aim at (further) decentralizing the history of empires, could be useful to ensure that newer forms of imperial history do not end up smuggling the perspective of the centre in through the backdoor under the guise of political correctness.

In this sense, transimperial history encompasses the grassroots level of imperial rule, which could be labelled as the history of everyday colonial life. It would draw attention to the diversity and inconsistency of life under colonial rule, to gender issues, to social mobility and mobile subjects, even if they were colonial or marginalized groups within the metropolises who have been linked to «white subalternity».⁴⁶ If we are serious about including views from below and from the outside, then the question becomes: How do we make all these people talk? An obvious place to begin would be to incorporate far more systematically all the source and archival material existing in non-European languages. Regional studies have repeatedly urged that this should be done and have often implemented it, yet this practice has seldom

43 A.L. Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Durham 2016, 39.

44 *Ibid.*, 38–39.

45 J. Adelman, «What is Global History Now?», in: *Aeon* (2 March 2017), <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>.

R. Drayton / D. Motadel, «Discussion: The Future of Global History», in: *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018) 1, 1–21, 12–13.

46 H. Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class, and «White Subalternity» in Colonial India*, New Delhi 2009.

found its way back to the global centres of imperial research. Lately a conference on the topic «Trans-imperial Cooperation and Transfers in the Age of Colonial Globalization» pointed in a similar direction. It proposed a triangular approach to the history of colonialism, which, by adding «a third variable» from the colonies, would have the potential to highlight indigenous agency.⁴⁷ Without proposing a fixed experimental design, a transimperial approach would surely facilitate the inclusion of encounters between the West and the Rest on a much more systematic and regular basis.

What appears promising is the history of anticolonial cooperation, which emerged in the early twentieth century and has been increasingly researched in a systematic way in recent years.⁴⁸ This is a trans-anti-imperial perspective, so to speak, that would take up the idea of anticolonial politics of comparison and include anticolonial connectivity outside Europe. This could comprise many different kinds of South–South cooperation and solidarity, which intensified in the interwar years: take, for example, the journey of the American civil rights activist and pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois to Asia in 1936, during which he also visited Manchukuo. After seeing Hsinking, the capital of this Japan-dominated empire, he noted in his travel manuscript: «Clearly, this colonial effort of a colored nation is something to watch.»⁴⁹ And when the second Sino-Japanese War finally broke out a few months after his visit, Du Bois again expressed a certain understanding for Japan's actions; for him the war was a necessary evil in order to break the domination of white rule globally. As this example shows, the inclusion of such anticolonial brokers would also help complicate our notion of imperial history and the coalitions it produces.

However, marginalization and exclusion cannot only be found on the level of individual colonial subjects or at the margins of the empire's metropolitan society. A transimperial perspective also reveals discrimination on a much more macro level. In this sense, entire empires could turn out to be marginalized: some because they were on what seemed to be the losing end of history, like those in Eastern Europe; some because they seemed to belong to another era and were somehow sidelined, such as the Portuguese empire, one of the oldest and most enduring of all; some for all these reasons and also for linguistic challenges, as was not infrequently the case for the Ottoman and Chinese empires, for instance. As a general rule, their position at the margins of current historiography replicates their marginalized position in the global world order during the first decades of the twentieth century. Most of them were non-European or seen as not European. This may not always have been

47 See: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7679>.

48 E. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford, New York 2007; M. Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the*

Seeds of Third-World Nationalism, Cambridge 2015; S. Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*, London, Cambridge 2015.

49 Quoted in: D.L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963*, New York 2000, 410.

the case, as is shown by the example of the Italian empire in both its republican and fascist versions and its shadowy existence in the general literature on imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Let us shortly turn to the Japanese with their – in a global perspective – also rather marginalized empire. They have lately been labelled as «subaltern imperialists», who had been «formally participating in the imperial system yet socially and culturally kept outside it». ⁵⁰ Surely, the term itself can be seen as a mere provocation: given Japanese expansion from the late nineteenth century on and the destruction it brought to Asia, one may think twice before using it. But from a transimperial perspective, the provocative idea of subaltern empires may be useful to open up the discussion. Especially the emergence of a non-Western empire like Japan's reveals the issue of hierarchy between empires. The rise of Japanese imperialism after 1900 reminds us also that this hierarchy was always contested and that this was one of the main reasons behind the bloodiest conflict of the twentieth century. ⁵¹

Japan was crucial in the imperial history of the modern world because it was the only major non-Western power to not only participate in the great imperialist game but eventually even to change it. In this, Japan's emergence was a challenge and a provocation in itself. At first, in the mid-nineteenth century, the country was overcome by colonialism. But shortly afterward, Japan started to expand and in this process reinvented imperialism and undercut colonialism simultaneously. Its victory in the Russian–Japanese war boosted its prestige, and its subaltern position was somehow relativized, since Japan emerged as a model inspiring many others. This makes it all the more surprising that Japan, as Jordan Sand has put it, «has generally been placed in brackets by historians of imperialism» and has not received «extended treatment in survey histories or theoretical works on empire». ⁵² Thus, its game-changing role has been widely underrated. ⁵³ Seen from this perspective, we have to take Japan from the margins of history and place it in the middle of the story.

All in all, a transimperial perspective would therefore demand a systematic inclusion of non-European and marginalized cases. It could thereby help put an end to the practice of considering European and non-European empires in isolation. Japan is only a case in point here. Generally speaking, a transimperial perspective claims to treat «subaltern empires» not as supplements but as essential parts of the world's imperial history.

50 J. Sand, «Subaltern Imperialists: The New Historiography of the Japanese Empire», in: *Past & Present* 225 (2014) 1, 273–288, 275.

51 Concerning the Second World War, see D. Hedinger, «The Imperial Nexus: The Second World War and the Axis in Global Perspective», in: *Journal of Global History* 12 (2017) 2, 184–205.

52 Sand, «Subaltern Imperialists», 273.

53 See also M. von Brescius / D. Hedinger, «The German and Japanese Empires: Great Power Competition and the World Wars», in: P. Bang / C. A. Bayly / W. Scheidel (eds.), *The Oxford World History of Empire* (forthcoming 2019).

II. Space

Another question at stake is how a transimperial approach can challenge common notions of imperial space. The marginalization or ranking of empires is often also based on spatial hierarchization. The imagining, mapping and territorialization of empires has mostly been researched within the confines of one particular imperial power. There is an important element that requires more attention: some physical spaces were claimed by different imperial powers, which in a sense co-existed at particular junctures. Apart from this, scholars deal with connecting and interacting actors at specific imperial sites, be it in contact zones, borderlands, port cities or metropolises.⁵⁴ Other studies emphasize the environmental dimension of the colonial sphere.⁵⁵

Building on these works, we could, for one, bring to light networks transcending empires by following actors who belonged to various empires at the same time. For another, we could gain new insights into the permeability and fluidity of boundaries if we looked at mobile actors such as smugglers, migrant labourers, fishermen or prostitutes who are often located at the margins of empires, as much as we have examined white-collar bureaucrats, diplomats, scientists or experts.

However, to discover something unexplored or previously unseen, we need to move away from solely looking at contact zones, interchange and entangled histories. In the end, we should not seek merely to prove transimperial connectivity once more. Analytically, integrating networks beyond empires has the potential to show us how individuals tried to create alternatives, break down connections – quite often by violent means – and then establish and enforce other boundaries. We may see how lines are drawn among empires and that they do not follow binary routes, be these centre-centre, centre-periphery or periphery-periphery patterns. Moreover, it offers a way out of schematic models because it implies that we include the colonized, the colonizer and ultimately the interimperial level. Networks that extend beyond empires also hint to us how many individuals acted for or against various empires.

In this sense, a transimperial approach may also help both the fields of empire studies and global history recover from a recent overdose of (studies on) connectivity, which embroiled scholars of these fields in a heated debate recently.⁵⁶ In our view, the connectivity virus also spread to the topic of spaces in-between empires. An emblematic example in this regard is the ocean, which is simply imagined as a surface across which goods, human beings or knowledge are transferred but not as a space with its own environmental disposition. Are the oceans anything other than

54 See e.g. Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*.

55 See e.g. A.W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Cambridge 1991, 86; C. Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire*, Oxford 2017.

56 Drayton / Motadel, «Discussion», 1–21; J. Adelman, «Global History». For more thoughts on the use of connections and transfers in global history, see R. Wenzlhuemer, *Globalgeschichte schreiben: Eine Einführung in 6 Episoden*, Konstanz, München 2017.

just a space enabling interimperial or international connectivity? Spaces in-between empires are often described as being mere routes by which knowledge, actors or commodities travel between empires. The epitome of such narratives is the scholarly discussion on maritime empires, namely how to define and distinguish them from continental empires. In this reading, oceans are typically referred to as spaces in-between empires. Some scholars have claimed a terrestrial bias in empire studies,⁵⁷ and others argue that we should abandon a separation of maritime and continental empires altogether.⁵⁸

In this regard, a transimperial approach offers an alternative to the master narrative that defines the British Empire as *the* maritime empire. Remarkably, the notion of the British Empire as an empire of commerce and not conquest often relies on how historical actors and agents for empires conceptualized empires themselves.⁵⁹ A transimperial perspective on various appropriations of empire by agents for empire shows that this was also very much part of the politics of comparison on the level of the historical actors. Many claimed that their respective empires were maritime empires, be it the Portuguese or the Japanese. Just how contested such imperial spaces were becomes obvious if we turn, for example, to the history of the Mediterranean in the interwar years.⁶⁰

What various empires have in common is what could be called the hierarchization of knowledge politics and the formation of authoritative knowledge within the transimperial politics of comparison, which they used to define their maritime empire and its political economy as being unique and thus essentially different and better than others. In this specific case, we can make out certain patterns or logics showing how hierarchies of knowledge are established and how practices of becoming familiarized with maritime space are transformed. There are certain patterns or logics produced through transimperial encounters that we cannot find when we approach the issue from a solely intra-imperial perspective. Part of the politics of comparison is the attempt also to disconnect and disrupt. The strategy of monopolizing knowledge was as important as that of adapting or diffusing knowledge.

If one moves away from using the British Empire and narrow notions of a commerce empire as the defining model of the maritime empire, then other settings also become apparent. Joseph MacKay, for instance, considers the idea of «pirate maritime empires» when looking at pirates in China. He describes these pirates as effective mercenary imperial agents who worked alternately for the Chinese empire or the Dutch and eventually even served as proxies in an imperial struggle over ac-

57 B. Klein / G. Mackenthun (eds.), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, New York, London 2004.

58 von Hirschhausen, «New Imperial History?».

59 D. Armitage, «The Elizabethan Idea of Empire», in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004), 269–277, 270–271.

60 For the French case, see P.M.E. Lorcin / T. Shepard (eds.), *French Mediterraneans: Transnational and Imperial Histories*, Lincoln 2016.

cess to ports, trade and the South China Sea.⁶¹ This point is all the more underscored when we consider the physicality of the space in-between and include in our understanding of *trans* the environmental disposition and materiality of the space itself. In the case of oceans, their pelagic dimension was very much part of resource imperialism. They were not only a surface that connected the metropolises with its colonies and functioned solely as a channel for the transfer of goods, persons or knowledge. For instance, William Tsutsui has shown how crucial the pelagic dimension was for the Japanese Empire in addition to its official territorial space.⁶² In the case of marine resources such as whales or tuna, the migration of these animals across imperial borders and along changing ocean currents played an important role in sustaining the imperial economy.⁶³

Comparable to this is what Jennifer Van Vleck has described as the «extraterritorial «empire of the air»» created by Pan Am. For her, the airplane offered the United States an empire without imperialism, based more on markets than colonies and more on commerce than on conquest.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, George Steinmetz pointed out that the U.S. empire after 1945 was not claiming territory but rather «a total domination of sea and air» since it was interested in the freer movement of capital, commodities and people and the stabilization of conditions within the *nomos*.⁶⁵ In a way, this represents a shift away from Carl Schmitt's often cited dual structure of land and sea as geographic spaces to be territorialized and goes beyond being a mere metaphor.⁶⁶ However, the transimperial approach shows that this feature is not unique to the «air» space in-between empires but also applies to others spaces such as the oceans, and it is also not solely applicable to the American empire.

III. Time

There is also a bias in terms of time. Eurocentrism is reflected in the widespread use of the term «Age of Empire», which only applies to the decades before the First World War.⁶⁷ From a Chinese perspective, for instance, chronologies of its «Age of Empire» would definitely look very different.

The idea of empires without geographical territories as markers of empires also evokes the image of informal empires as being economic empires, which generally

61 J. MacKay, «Pirate Nations: Maritime Pirates as Escape Societies in Late Imperial China», in: *Social Science History* 37 (2013) 4, 551–573.

62 W. Tsutsui, «The Pelagic Empire: Reconsidering Japanese Expansion», in: I. J. Miller / J. A. Thomas / B. L. Walker (eds.), *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*, Honolulu 2013, 21–38.

63 N. Heé, «Negotiating Migratory Tuna: Territorialization of the Oceans, Trans-war Knowledge and Fisheries Diplomacy», in: *Diplomatic History* (forthcoming).

64 J. van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy*, London, Cambridge, MA 2013.

65 G. Steinmetz, «Imperialism or Colonialism? From Windhoek to Washington, by Way of Basra», in: C. Calhoun / F. Cooper / K. W. Moore (eds.), *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, New York 2006, 135–156, 147.

66 C. Schmitt, *Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*, Cologne-Lövenich 1981 (1942).

67 E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*, London 1987.

is emblematically referred to as the United States during the Cold War. It raises the question of continuities of empires despite formal decolonization and how we address these processes in terms of imperial formations and chronologies. It enables us to critically explore typical ruptures within historiographical periodization. Empires are a omnipresent political structure in history.⁶⁸ Thus, a transimperial approach could help overcome, even more radically than before, both the pre-modernity/modernity rupture and the colonization-versus-decolonization distinction within historiographical periodization.

Moreover, a transimperial approach not only enables us to trace possible transformations from one form of empire to another or to confirm their co-existence; it also expands the horizon for politics of comparison in a synchronic and diachronic manner. A case in point here is the use of the politics of comparison by a couple of empires in which they referred to imperial predecessors. This was a widely used method to legitimize imperial practices or policies and also to create common ground for several empires. Mussolini's idea of a fascist empire as a third Roman Empire is one obvious example.⁶⁹ There is also a transimperial story of how empires «Hellenized» and «Romanized» their regimes. This has been described as deriving from the nineteenth-century notion of the civilizing mission. Therefore, the argument goes, comparisons drawn between classical empires – in which the Greek model is often applied to empires with colonies while Roman model is an example how to govern colonized subjects in a vast imperial territory – are not as neutral as their advocates believed.⁷⁰ What still awaits our empirical analysis is how marginalized empires and their diachronic politics of comparison can be integrated into this picture of imperial genealogies and comparisons, which has focused on what has been assumed to be the great powers.

The question of how to periodize and connect the last decades of the nineteenth century and the interwar years is another topic that has the potential to dig deeper and provide us with valuable empirical work. Some scholars have stated that «cooperative imperialism» was typical for the pre-war period but vanished in 1914.⁷¹ Others stress a thesis of continuity – for example regarding German colonialism and later forms of German empire or Nazi genocide – in terms of knowledge transfer and techniques of governance and violence.⁷² In either case, we think that linear genealogies on an intra-national level are as problematic as assuming that one form of imperialism, such as cooperative imperialism, can be strictly delineated from

68 Burbank / Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 3–4.

69 Concerning the question of fascist imperialism, see R. Hofmann / D. Hedinger, «Editorial – Axis Empires: Towards a Global History of Fascist Imperialism», in: *Journal of Global History* 12 (2017) 2, 161–165.

70 A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History*, Princeton 2018, 25–26.

71 Barth / Cvetkovski, «Introduction», 16.

72 See, for instance, J. Zimmerer, «War, Concentration Camps and Genocide in South-West Africa. The First German Genocide», in: J. Zimmerer / J. Zeller (eds.), *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War (1904–1908) in Namibia and its Aftermath*, Monmouth 2008, 41–63; A. D. Moses, «Empire, Colony, Genocide. Keywords and Philos-

another, especially when it is even unclear what would be said to have replaced cooperative imperialism. Thus, a transimperial approach could broaden the question of continuity, which now is addressed within the confines of national narratives, as is most obvious in the case of German imperialism from the *Kaiserreich* to the Third Reich.

Apart from tracing developments back, a transimperial approach also offers a lot of potential for examining imperial continuities and ruptures that accompany decolonizing processes. By addressing these processes from a transimperial perspective not only in a diachronic but also in a synchronic manner, we can learn how empires competed, compared or cooperated with each other in the matter of decolonization. We already have studies that interpret development aid and the emergence of new technocratic regimes as a new form of imperialism, mainly by some European imperial powers and international organizations such as the United Nations. However, scholarship on this topic regarding non-European empires and their legacies is still in its infancy. Moreover, we still lack a transimperial approach to the topic that integrates cooperation, competition and connectivity in this regard. If we looked at it in a transimperial manner, we could make out patterns of commonality among empires as different as the British, French or Japanese, but we could also discover what they did not share, both on the level of structures and discourses.

4. How to Reconsider Master Narratives in Empire Studies

Related to this is the broader question of particularism and universalism of empires. In the end, what do we get when we address this crucial question from a transimperial point of view? Does it mean that we find the same patterns and logics in any empire, or are there still distinctive features and particularities we should point out? Do the master narratives for each empire change with such an approach? Do they appear less unique? How do we treat and address singularities within empires without falling into the trap of essentializing them?

With the transimperial approach, master narratives can be adjusted, for one, by identifying commonly shared patterns and logics and, for another, by defining specific tangible elements. In doing so, it makes sense to rely on a deductive analysis of structures, material manifestations like technologies or discursive appropriations. On the whole, master narratives can be adjusted by bringing the peripheries into the centre and by abandoning an implicit ranking among the empires and their historiographies within the field of empire studies. However, since the transimperial approach also targets the infra-imperial level and combines views from outside looking

ophy», in: A. D. Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide. Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, New York, Oxford 2008, 3–54; I. V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Lon-

don, Ithaca, NY 2005; R. Gerwarth / S. Malinowski, «Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz», *Central European History* 42 (2009) 2, 279–300.

in and from the inside looking out, we discern a range of maxims of governance, not only in each individual, hermetically sealed empire but more so in an infra-imperial context, meaning that we also have to consider variations of colonial rule within one specific empire. Within both the British and French empires, there were numerous and varying ideas of colonial rule. Especially for the German context it has been shown that politics varied in different colonies of the same empire, for instance in Namibia and Samoa.⁷³ Moreover, we have to consider the gap between theory and practice in exercising imperial rule. Imperial discourses may have dwelt on the merits of either assimilation or the principle of divide and conquer, but this is not to say by any means that local potentates actually acted accordingly on the ground. Thus, the transimperial perspective helps us avoid generalizations and sharpens our view of intra-imperial differences and differences in colonial rule between colonies belonging to the same empire.

Furthermore, a transimperial perspective helps us question other common master narratives. For example, does the notion of the uniqueness of Japanese imperialism, which is often seen as a reaction to or even mimicry of Western imperialism, still hold true? Or was the British Empire the all-defining model for the others, or are the imperial processes of the various nations proof for mutual learning? Let us take a look at the establishment of a colonial penal system and corporal punishment in the Japanese empire. The common assumption in scholarship is that the introduction of corporal punishment as a means of colonial rule, specifically the introduction of flogging in Taiwan, Japan's first colony, stems from a linear knowledge transfer of colonial practices from the British Empire.⁷⁴ A micro-level look at how practices of flogging were implemented in Taiwan shows that this process was not preceded by any transfer of British concepts as has been supposed in previous research. The Japanese colonial government appropriated what was called a «Chinese punishment apparatus» but did not simply adopt the model of corporal punishment used in the British colonies. Moreover, knowledge about the «Chinese punishment apparatus» was knowledge acquired by a commission of experts working to design a «modern» legal system in Japan around 1871. This knowledge then travelled several years later to Taiwan in a newly adapted form. Using insights gained about the common forms of whipping from the Qing period on the Chinese mainland – but not necessarily in Taiwan – Japanese legal scholars ultimately created a «scientized» switch for the colonial government. In so doing, they adopted a British strategy to modernize sentencing by applying those punishments that were believed to be traditional for the respective societies and legitimized flogging by relying on concepts that were perceived at the time to be «Western» and «innovative». Clearly,

73 G. Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*, Chicago 2007.

74 D.V. Botsman, *Punishment and Power in the Making of Modern Japan*, Princeton, Oxford 2005, 212.

constant comparison with other imperial powers was key in the Japanese debate on and practice of corporal punishment and colonial violence. The Japanese colonial government thus cited the practice of corporal punishment in the German colonies to counter the abolishment of corporal punishment in Japanese colonies. However, international criticism about it subsequently led to the abolishment of corporal punishment in both Korea and Taiwan in 1921 because the public in the metropole feared that these «barbaric» practices would harm the Japanese Empire's ability to compete in the international economy.⁷⁵

The case of introducing flogging in the Japanese Empire shows how the narrative of the British Empire as the definitive model is crumbling away if we look at the interplay of imperial competition, comparison and connection. The Japanese version of corporal punishment was not mere mimicry but rather a process of layering various forms of knowledge and practice in which an emphasis on former Japanese flogging practices were merged with invented Chinese Qing imperial techniques in a transimperial way. This is only one example of the way in which existing master narratives can be challenged. However, it shows the potential of transimperial approaches to combine general theoretical and methodological assumptions with in-depth case studies, a combination which seems to be very promising for future studies.⁷⁶

75 N. Heé, *Imperiales Wissen und koloniale Gewalt. Japans Herrschaft in Taiwan, 1895–1945*, Frankfurt am Main 2012.

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ABSTRACT

**Transimperial History –
Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition**

This Forum article argues that a turn in empire history is needed, one which we label «transimperial». Whereas national history has been transnationalized in recent decades, the history of empires has, by and large, remained nationalized. Since transnational history, global history, postcolonial studies and new imperial history all offer an abundance of tools to tear down imperial borders and deconstruct nationalized narratives, the moment seems to have come for a shift, namely for what we call a transimperial approach to imperial history. We seek to show how such an approach makes it possible to dynamize and decentralize the history of empires both on the level of empirical research and historiographical narratives. By including marginalized empires we offer a way to overcome British centrism of empire studies. On the methodological level, this contribution seeks to discuss imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as entangled processes. The point is not to analytically isolate cooperation or competition but to shed light on how they reinforced each other and how connectivity plays into this. The article shows that a key to establishing a transimperial approach is to consider time and space together by focusing on the transformative aspect of competition, cooperation and connectivity in spaces in-between empires. In this article, we highlight transimperial histories *avant la lettre*, on which such an approach can rely. Finally, we discuss how this approach helps challenge essentializing master narratives in empire studies, be it the one in which the British Empire serves as a model for other empires or the one where the Japanese empire is seen as a mimicry of European imperialism.

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