

Research Questions and Goals

Empires and Hegemonic Powers in World History: Different epochs and global historical comparisons

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If the more recent and the latest research on empire histories is taken into consideration, then three results can be determined:

1. Individual case studies of empires have been and continue to be subjected to more precise study on a case by case basis in isolation from each other, such as the research into causes of the rapid collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in the wake of the First World War 1917-18, the fall of the British Empire over the years (with the topic of “decline” dominating British contemporary history for decades), the rapid disintegration of the USSR in 1991, and the loss of prestige and credibility of the “liberal empire” of the United States of America under George W. Bush that is to be described as dramatic, along with the calling into question of its world power ambitions that is associated with it.

2. In part, historical empires and imperial powers are arbitrarily compared with each other in only a scattered manner and analyzed without reflecting upon the greater historical backgrounds of origin, threads of development, and the relations to third party factors of power or reflecting upon the consequences and results that resulted from them, that is, without including the corresponding overall contexts of historical complexity in the history of power. One example has been provided most recently by the considerations posed by Münkler on empires which, although they now and then also went into antiquity, were almost exclusively limited to the Roman Empire and both omitted the contemporaneous and competing empires of the Parthians and the Sassanids and left the old empires of the Near East (the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians) nearly completely without notice. Christian universal historiography had still anchored these empires firmly in its horizon of observation. In the sense of a globalized world history, it seems advisable to fix one’s gaze as broadly as possible both in terms of geographic width and historical depth. Only in this way can a sensible and historically profound comparison be made.

3. An undertaking which is large-scale (that is, spreading across eras), interdisciplinary, and comparative in the sense of an “*histoire totale*” has up to now not been managed by individual researchers, and indeed remains possible only through the process of a concerted and comprehensive action by a series of qualified experts in the field.

As a result of these considerations, the largest possible number of historically recognized and tangible imperial orders and formations should not only be recalled

within the framework of a large-scale international conference, they should also be systematically analyzed in a manner that is:

- spatially extensive, that is, intercontinental;
- comprehensive in terms of time, that is, spreading across eras, and consequently
- universally historical, that is, presented in a comparative manner and analyzed according to unified criteria.

The range should stretch from ancient Near Eastern written cultures through the most modern times and the present. Empires of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Modern Era, and contemporary history, starting from the Near East and continuing on to Europe, North America, South America, and Asia, should be recorded and compared with one another.

This is only possible in a concerted group action of a network of around forty experts within the framework of a large international symposium with fixed, unified approaches that have been agreed upon and binding research criteria.

Accordingly, the rough structure of the symposium is to be divided into three sections, or else the order of the papers of the symposium is to be organized into empires by "Ancient History", "Medieval and Modern History", and "Contemporary History". The papers are to be structured according to the state of matters beginning with two main accesses (the material history and the reception history of the empires), each of which is then based upon a view toward five individual sub-criteria:

A. Material History of the Empires

1. Origin (founding myth? power vacuum? A-polarities? neighbors? power history background and power politics context? antagonistic powers? [Starting out from considerations from Charles S. Maier, pp. 23, 26, et seq.], polarities?)
2. Structure (leadership, representatives, apparatuses, armies, soft-power factors, institutions, administration, center/periphery, centralization/ decentralization);
3. Extent ("relevant power area", starting out from Herfried Münkler, p. 23), expansion (growth from within toward the outside or from the outside in? Maier, p. 69), establishment, integration, self-presentation (openness, uncertainty, "the dynamics of unstable borders", Maier, p. 48), hypocrisy (as the price of imperialism and of empires toward democracies, Maier, p. 64) and legitimation, missions, promises, communication both within and to the outside, capabilities for reform, resistance, and regeneration, crossing the "Augustan threshold" (Michael Doyle, p. 80), permanence versus a short-lived nature: *longue durée* empires or brief war empires?;
4. Reactions and perceptions by third parties, the larger power-historical context;
5. Erosion and disintegration (creeping and protracted decline, change of dynasties, institutional decay) or abrupt end and total collapse? ----> repercussions on the reception).

B. Reception History of the Empires

1. Concrete effective history (heritage, legacy, and achievements of civilization):
2. Imagined receptions (removals, historical fiction, that which has been forgotten and ignored, stylizations, overinterpretation, disproportionateness in ascribing significance);
3. References to historical empires, forerunners, generation of historical consciousness and tradition, imperial image continuities);
4. Historiographies (historians and their schools: who makes an empire into an empire, who capitalizes an "Empire"?);
5. The state of modern research and comparisons spreading across eras (analogies, parallels, differences).

By way of example, these criteria are to be systematically tested and treated for all subjects of research (see the conference program).

Large empires do not just form as abstract power structures that are to be described, but rather they also develop a specific imperial architecture. On the basis of preserved historical monuments as well as archeological legacies, they can be not only experienced in concrete terms, but also analyzed in a scholarly manner. These historical monuments can be taken into consideration as essential symbols of imperial ideologies as well as expressions of the imperial will to shape.

In the case of the Holy Roman Empire, the "imperial cathedrals" in stone represented carefully composed power ideologies of a specifically imperial demonstration of power. St. Michaelis, in the historical region of the present-day German state of Lower Saxony, is an outstanding example of this. Starting out from the floor plan that has remained identical, this piece of world cultural heritage, from the original wooden ceiling that has been preserved and the unique reconstruction achievement of the postwar generations, stands for not just a Romanesque cathedral, but also for the idea of the heavenly empire on earth.

The motivation for and objective of this large-scale conference therefore consist of embedding the history of this unique edifice in a larger context of world history that spreads across eras, in order to clearly show the significance and status of this example of world cultural heritage. Thus this thematic area will not only be taken into account in the inaugural lecture, but a large segment of the imperial orders, from the Europe of the Middle Ages and the Modern Era through contemporary history, will be the subject of this major event.

The results of this conference, which will be held in Hildesheim within the framework of the anniversary celebration "One Thousand Years of Michaelis", are to be documented in a comprehensive publication.

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