

„A white man mustn't be frightened in front of ‚natives‘; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.“

George Orwell, 1936

Call for Papers

Helpless Imperialists

Imperial failure, Radicalization and Violence between High Imperialism and Decolonization

Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS),
Freiburg, Germany, 14-16 January 2010

Organizers:

Stephan Malinowski, Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum

Keynote Addresses:

Isabel V. Hull, Cornell University
N.N.

In *Shooting an Elephant* (1936), George Orwell, once a member of the British colonial police in Burma, depicts a scene where a young police officer has to kill an elephant that has gotten out of control. Equipped with a gun unsuitable for such a purpose, and surrounded by a crowd that was about to witness his failure to perform the task, the representative of colonial rule turns toward hatred and aggression against the bystanders, the „evil-spirited little beasts.“ Over the course of a few pages, Orwell dissects an imperial constellation where weakness and failure is transformed into symbolic rule through the unleashing of aggression and violence.

Empires stand for power and superiority. Yet the bearers of imperial rule often find themselves in fragile power positions. In classical colonial situations, they constitute

tiny minorities in environments perceived as hostile and threatening. Long before de-colonization began, the "islands of white" were positions of weakness rather than strength. The situation is similar at the frontiers of continental empires, where the empire's representatives do not even have to constitute small minorities to feel the vulnerability of their position vis-à-vis national movements that challenge the empires' claim to undivided power.

The focus of this conference is the threatened, the frustrated, the *helpless imperialist*. Emblematic for this figure is the inability to control the imperial periphery through a policy of assimilation, military superiority that proves useless against decentralized forms of resistance, attacks on settler farms that reveal the fragility of the "thin white line," or the collapse of grandiose colonial projects. How do the bearers of imperial/colonial rule cope with looming or actual failure? How do they deal with fears that the asymmetrical power relations, essential for their rule, might shift in favor of the ruled? Are radicalized forms of rule, including mass violence, standard strategies to establish, maintain or restore the asymmetry of power? To what degree is the fragility of imperial rule the cause of radicalization, to what degree is it just used as a pretext for suppression and violence?

Frustrations over failing imperial ambitions and fears of losing a privileged power position with possibly dramatic consequences are integral yet under-researched elements in the history of imperialism/colonialism. Therefore, this conference will place the figure of the *helpless imperialist* in the center of attention to test its explanatory potential for the period between 1880 and 1960, which was characterized by increasingly radical forms of imperial rule and, particularly during the two world wars, a turn toward unprecedented mass violence at the colonial/imperial frontier.

We invite contributions from scholars in all areas and disciplines working on the following topics and questions:

- Imperial/colonial constellations: What were the consequences of scenarios that revealed the disturbing discrepancy between grand imperial ambitions and the actual power to put them into practice? Was the turn toward radical forms of rule - such as increased suppression, forced resettlement, war against the colonial subjects, mass murder and genocide - the standard reaction, or can we find alternative responses?
- The imperial/colonialist activist: We invite portraits of the imperial types such as the "well-meaning" missionary, the colonial planer and technocrat as the self-declared instrument of progress, the activist at the imperial frontier who claims

to act on behalf of a "civilizing mission," or the colonial warrior as the widely traveled specialist of violence willing to provide his expertise against those who challenge the empires. Possible are portraits of entire groups or individual figures as long as they shed light on how the bearers of imperial/colonial rule dealt with the experience of failure, powerlessness and threat.

- Representations of imperial/colonial rule: In a period characterized by the rise of mass media and the growing significance of public opinion, the history of imperialism/colonialism cannot be understood without the representation of imperial/colonial rule. How was this rule represented both at the imperial frontier and at home, be it through newspapers, literature, film and exhibitions, or be it through architecture, urban planning and political ceremonies? We invite papers that deal with the legitimization or de-legitimization of imperial politics through these different forms of representation. Of particular interest is the question of whether the mass media reflect or actually create those scenarios of failure and threat used to legitimize forms of imperial rule that went beyond the generally accepted ethical norms of the time.

Please send a one-page paper proposal along with a brief academic CV via email to helpless.imperialist@frias.uni-freiburg.de by 30 April 2009.

The organizers will try to cover the costs of transportation and accommodation for all invited panelists. The conference will be held in English.

Contact:

helpless.imperialist@frias.uni-freiburg.de

Stephan Malinowski, Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum
Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS)
School of History
Starkenstr. 44
79104 Freiburg
Germany