

„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

Helpless Imperialists

Imperial failure, Radicalization and Violence between High Imperialism and Decolonization

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Organizers:

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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 decolonization 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.

Contributions during the conference will address the following three central aspects:

- 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 agents: Particularly welcome are 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. One therefore has to ask: 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? Papers will deal in this section with the legitimization or delegitimization 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.

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