Conference Report

"Modern Transimperial and Interimperial Histories: Forms, Questions, Prospects," organized by Cyrus Schayegh, financed by the Pierre du Bois Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation, Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, 12-14 May 2022.

Until about a decade ago, most historians of empires, especially Western ones, empirically studied them in separation, and in effect methodologically and conceptually treated them separately, too. At the same time, from the 1990s some historians reframed metropolitan-colonial relationships, emphasizing interdependencies as much as hierarchies. Building on this revision and on insights from global history, transinterimperial historians working on different themes and areas since the early 2010s have been studying a variety of interdependencies, relationships and hierarchies between and across empires and their peoples. Building on a handful of earlier conferences, we felt the time was ripe for a first major stock-taking of this blossoming field. To do so, this three-day conference brought together junior and senior historians who, specializing in different themes and focusing on geographical areas including the US, European, Japanese, and Eurasian empires, have produced pathbreaking work in transimperial history. They were joined

by a few doctoral students from the International History and Politics department of the Geneva Graduate Institute who work on related themes.

Following welcome notes by Irina du Bois and Cyrus Schayegh, the conference began with a keynote lecture by Louise Young (University of Wisconsin-Madison), "Now You See It, Now You Don't: Changing Sightlines on the Japanese Empire." Focusing on Japan and the United States as sites for the production of "imperial knowledge" after 1945, she tracked the connections between geo-political context and evolving accounts of imperialisms past and present. Her account divided into three phases: the early Cold War in Asia, the high growth era of the seventies and eighties, and most recent period of Japanese decline since the 1990s.

Panel 1, "Historiographical and conceptual reflections," began with a presentation by Nadin Heé (Osaka University). Building on a foundational article she co-wrote with Daniel Hedinger in 2017, which posited competition, cooperation, and connectivity as three fundamental transimperial modes, she tabled three additional C´s: the conditionality, commonalities, and commensurability of horizontal and vertical expansion—e.g. in oceans and in the air—within transimperial formations. Moreover, she examined the issue of chronologies in these processes, and discussed the relevance of territorialization and de-territorialization processes. Véronique Dimier (Université Libre de Bruxelles) discussed how comparisons between French and British colonial administrations used for political reasons during colonial times resurfaced following decolonization, well after their original context had disappeared. She also made several hypotheses as to their use by networks of actors in fields such as immigration and development policies. Paul Kramer (Vanderbilt University) broached three questions. One was the relationship between the inter-imperial and international as a way of framing larger-than-national historical questions. Another one was the role of technocratic politics in inter-imperial histories, whose scholars often focus on technocratic elites. And a third was the value of inter-imperial history for

making sense of transnational histories of the United States, and the importance of U. S. history for inter-imperial history.

Panel 2, "Regions," started with a talk by Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz (Cambridge University). Looking at various interactions within Asia at the turn of the twentieth century, she argued that the region points to constellations of connection, competition, and cooperation that exceed and subtend empire and that point to a longer history of Asian relations that imperialism did not squash. In some cases, these regional relations gained greater importance as the remaining geography in which countries could continue to perform older rituals of sovereignty in an increasingly Western-dominated imperial international order. On the other hand, the distinctly transimperial politics of comparison played a role in constructing ideas of region in Southeast Asia. Anne-Isabelle Richard (Leiden University) started with a series of conceptual notes on the distinction between global, transimperial, and regional approaches and topics. She then examined how such approaches pertain to interwar European cooperation surrounding the question of possible common European action in colonies, including in "Eurafrica;" and inquired what kind of histories we can write using these approaches. Alexey Miller (European University at St. Petersburg) examined the particularly strong entanglement of confessional and national policies of four continental Empires—the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Romanov and Ottoman ones—from the 18th to early 20th century, and argued that the collapse of all four empires during World War I resulted from a policy shift from restraint and cooperation to confrontation and mutual subversion. Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zürich) scrutinised the complex relationship in the first half of the twentieth century between the late colonial Raj and the United States' emerging liberal empire. Focusing on what could be described as 'soft power,' including the American Marathi Mission, the Young Men's Christian Association's branches in India, and

the spread of Hollywood films and jazz, he argued that rivalries aside, the US-British relation was characterised to a large extent by interpenetration, mutual borrowing, and co-operation.

Panel 3, "Economy," comprised four presentations. Marc-William Palen (University of Exeter) argued that owing to the centripetal force of British imperial historiography, historians have paid less attention to how the British embrace of free trade from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries sparked a counter-movement of economic nationalism across the imperial world order. He showed that tracing the transimperial influence of German-American economic theorist Friedrich List's *The National System of Political Economy* (1841) among leading nationalists in both the imperial and the anti-colonial world provides a much-needed corrective by illustrating the transimperial crossings of economic nationalism in an imperial age. Moritz von Brescius (Harvard University) presented a paper that undercut the implicit success bias of many single commodity histories and 'global commodity chains', focusing on the tropical rubber-yielding species Ficus elastica as a once globalised but ultimately failed plantation crop. Ficus elastica connected empires through exchanges of seeds and agronomic protocols. But it also fuelled agronomic projects that were meant to become independent of foreign supplies of strategic tropical products that seemed to be on the brink of exhaustion due to unchecked over-exploitation. Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Universität Rostock) used the story of Yu Xiaqing—a middleman of European banks in Shanghai 1880-1930, co-founder of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and successful owner of a new Chinese steamship line rivaling with the colonial lines—to reflect on several conceptual question: how do semi-colonial spaces like the Chinese treaty ports allow us to undermine colonized/colonizer binaries? How do they produce environments that are particularly prone to the importation and adaptation of global trends? And how can biographies drive interimperial history writing? Jiajia Liu (Geneva Graduate Institute) showcased financial capitalism on the periphery by analyzing the 1910 rubber stock market

bubble in Shanghai and its connections with the London market. She revisited the center-periphery dynamics by shifting the focus from the asymmetries to the interactions between the two.

Panel 4, "Labor(ers) and merchants," began with a presentation by M'hamed Oualdi (Sciences Po Paris), about what the demise of slavery in modern North Africa tells us about transimperial histories in the modern Mediterranean. He argued that while a major part of North Africa was under Ottoman control for more than three centuries during the early modern period, the historiography of North Africa is still not taking into account this longstanding Ottoman influence—and its significance for writing encompassingly transimperial stories and biographies in and around the Mediterranean also in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Alexander Keese (Université de Genève) examined forced labor practices in World War II Africa. He argued that these practices were considerably reinforced relative to the 1930s; that different empires' administrators considered this a return to the normal; that they stood in contact with each other as they did so, such that Africa was in fact an inter-imperial laboratory of exploitation also during those war years; and that related practices were so excessive that they helped trigger a massive push for reform just following the war. Christof Dejung (Universität Bern) examined how the history of mercantile elites and the business networks they established may contribute to a novel perspective on transimperial connections. Due to their social and economic capital, these elites often had considerable agency, which allowed them to develop ties that crossed state boundaries; in fact, the ability to build such networks was often the very reason for their economic success. Focussing on non-state-actors also allowed him to discuss the rather ambiguous relation between state and business – or territoriality and capitalist markets – and to point out how a globally shared mercantile culture facilitated establishing mercantile networks.

Panel 5, “Settlers and agriculture,” started with a talk by Peter Lavelle (Temple University). He examined how Chinese elites imagined new possibilities for Chinese colonization in the Qing Empire's frontier territories in the late nineteenth century, during a period when overseas Chinese migration surged. He argued that imperial competition, anti-Chinese racism, labor exploitation, and fears of overpopulation led to a resurgent valorization of Chinese workers as agents of colonization and nation-building, shedding light on the dynamic "coproduction" of colonialisms in modern history. Martin Dusinberre (Universität Zürich) folded together archival collections at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives in Tokyo and the municipal archives in Kaminoseki, an Inland Sea coastal town near Hiroshima, with archives documenting British and US imperialism in Queensland and the Hawaiian archipelago, respectively. In doing so, he showed how Japan was imbricated with the production of British power in Australia and with US settler colonialism—and called on historians of Japan to pay greater attention to Indigenous contexts in our reading of Japanese settler practices across the Asia-Pacific world. Mona Bieling (Geneva Graduate institute) examined the transimperial connections that run through the botanical garden of the Hebrew University Jerusalem during the time of British mandatory presence in Palestine (ca. 1917-1948), analyzing the background, education, and research trajectories of the Jewish immigrant botanists involved in establishing and shaping the garden. She also reflected on a curious imperial absence during the time, namely that of the British Empire, by comparing the aims and workings of the Jerusalem garden to the botanical hub of the British Empire, Kew Gardens in London, and British colonial satellite gardens, e.g. in Calcutta and Jamaica. She concluded that botanical scientific knowledge creation and implementation show that transimperial connections (and de-connections) were an important part of the Zionist nation-building process.

Panel 6, “War and violence,” began with a talk by Alexander Morrison (University of Oxford). He spoke about the transfers of knowledge, culture and techniques between the British, Russian and French Empire in the 19th century, focusing particularly on their colonies in India, Central Asia, and Algeria respectively. He showed that while the Russians attempted to re-use British and French ideas in governance, agriculture and ethnography, the British and French only really sought to emulate the ruthless Russian attitude to colonial warfare. He suggested some avenues for future research, in particular the role that highly-qualified Russian emigre colonial experts seem to have played in the British and French empires after the First World War. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky (University of California, Santa Barbara) examined the histories of migration and violence in the borderlands of the Ottoman and Russian empires between the mid-eighteenth century and World War I. The Russo-Ottoman wars generated migrations of Muslims and Christians across the border and the notion that one's faith correlated to one's belonging to a specific empire, with violent consequences for "minorities" in the borderlands. Daniel Hedinger (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) argued that the Second World War was foremost a struggle between empires, fought for their expansion and survival—ultimately to determine which kind of empire would dominate the world. However, both in historiography and memory politics, the conflict is still first and foremost understood and described as a war between (European) nation-states. He discussed how a transimperial approach could help overcome such national and Eurocentric readings of the Second World War. Martin Thomas’ (University of Exeter) paper “Imperialist networks of influence in 1960s Algeria, Biafra, and Portuguese Africa” discussed postwar decolonization, especially late colonial counter-insurgencies. He focussed on a series of issues that can profit (also) from a transimperial perspective, including lawfare, chronologies and endings, gender, and practices of forced population removal.

Panel 7, “Race,” began with a talk by Ulrike Lindner (Universität zu Köln), who argued that transimperial co-operation was mainly based on the racist assumption of a European “white superiority” in the colonies that should not be questioned and was to be upheld against the indigenous populations under all circumstances. Her empirical examples were colonial cities and interimperial co-operation in colonial wars and its challenge in WW1. Especially the latter case also allowed her to discuss the limits of racist-based interimperial co-operation. Patrick Bernhard (University of Oslo) looked at the international imprint of the Italian Fascists’ dream of empire, considering in particular in the British Empire. In the debates that unfolded on colonial policies during the interwar years, Fascist biopolitics served both as an important model and as a counter model, for instance in Britain and in dominions like Australia. What is more, it influenced migration and settlement policies even after the end of World War II, thereby sustaining notions of `white supremacy´ in larger swaths of the post-war world. Eileen Ryan (Temple University) argued that while Italians of the liberal era learned the lessons of imperial rule through hierarchical differentiation from British and French example, Italian imperialists constantly feared that working class Italian settlers would subvert the fundamental distinction between colonizer and colonized. The fascist regime designed the Colonial Race Laws of 1937 as a solution by reducing stratification to a simple dichotomy between (white) Italians and Others. But not everyone fit on one side or the other—and she examined some individuals who troubled that color line, frustrated fascist hierarchies, and hence can tell us much about the sheer complexities of racial identities in late imperialism.

Panel 8, “Knowledge,” began with a talk by Nile Green (UCLA). His paper addressed the problem of inter-Asian cultural commensurability through a case-study of a 1937 Urdu translation of the classical Chinese Shujing (‘Classic of History’). By positioning the Urdu text in relation to other Indian and Middle Eastern accounts of China, and showing the triangulated

process of translation via an earlier English version of the Shujing, the paper sheds light on the transimperial and intercontinental dimensions of apparently intra-continental, inter-Asian interactions. Damiano Matasci (Université de Genève) focused on two inter-imperial institutions established in 1950, namely the Commission for Technical Cooperation in Africa South of the Sahara and the Scientific Council for Africa South of the Sahara, exploring the nature, scope and limits of scientific cooperation in Africa during the late colonial period. The study of such bodies, he argued, can shed new light on the role of science in the relegitimation of colonial rule after WWII. It also reveals how dynamics of competition, collaboration and connectivity between and beyond empires were reframed by the decolonization process. Daniel Laqua (Northumbria University) examined the transimperial dimensions of interwar and postwar student mobility, student activism and internationalism., stressing the intersection between these phenomena. He tackled this broader subject through a specific focus on international student organisations which, as he showed, generated mobilities of their own and which engaged with empire at multiple levels. Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (Universidade de Coimbra) argued that interimperial organizations were one of the most important actors shaping the historical dynamics and entanglements between internationalism, decolonization and development that characterized the post-WWII momentum. They materialized various modalities of strategic cooperation aiming to manage, and sometimes counterbalance, the activities of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, responding to their growing interference, including over "dependent" territories. He provided some illustrations about why and how they did so, on a number of areas and topics, mobilizing diverse institutions and "epistemic communities", with various goals and consequences.

Panel 9, "Law," began with a talk by Jenny Day (Skidmore College). She argued that the dynamic between law, political upheaval, and the imperialist stance of Western states like Britain

towards China animated the politics of modern China from the Qing dynasty in the 1800s, illuminating the important yet sometimes overlooked legal dimension of the country's political history. Laws and legal norms adjudicating political crimes not only affected the fate of political criminals; they also shaped the rhetoric, strategies, and mobility of revolutionaries and rebels. Moreover, the Chinese revolution had a significant impact on its history of extraterritoriality and the development of the Chinese legal profession and criminal law. Pushing beyond dominant notions of late Ottoman pan-Islam, Lale Can (City University of New York) showed that the Ottoman Caliphate did not have the power (and, often, the will) to prevent or mitigate European colonial rule in Islamic lands; that the actions of many non-Ottoman Muslims were often fundamentally at odds with the empire's attempts to defend and preserve its sovereignty; and that the caliphate was an integral part of an empire that ruled Muslims and non-Muslims through difference. Florian Wagner (Universität Erfurt) showed how colonial experts from 13 countries established the International Colonial Institute in 1893. It became the most important transimperial think tank in the twentieth century and promoted a reformed colonialism. To legitimize empires the institute organized their economy along cooperative and corporative ways, which brought it close to both fascist and functionalist colonial projects. Anna Diem (Geneva Graduate Institute) showed that reading the propaganda materials of Egyptian exiles in Europe around the First World War reveals four distinct languages of legitimation used to oppose British rule in Egypt. The main protagonists often used several ones in parallel and often switched among them strategically to create transimperial alliances in sync with shifts in the world's geopolitical constellation.

Panel 10, "Nation(alism)s," started with a talk by Ronald Grigor Suny (University of Michigan). Exploring the literature on the late Romanov, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires, he investigated the strategies employed by imperial elites to maintain imperial rule in the face of

domestic and international challenges. He noted that the three moved in different directions with different strategies, some centralizing, others decentralizing; some accommodating nationalities, others attempting homogenization of the peoples of the empire, leading in one case to genocide. And without resorting to a narrative of inevitability of imperial decline and fall, he asked how plausible imperial survival on the European continent was in an age when empires managed to maintain themselves elsewhere for another half century or more. Shellen Wu (The University of Tennessee Knoxville) examined the continuities that crossed the transition from empire to the nation-state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in frontier policy. She argue that the frontier not only continued to have an outsized importance in China and other parts of the world but also took on new dynamics with changing technologies of communication and transportation. Global examples of frontier settlements in the twentieth century, from Germany to the Soviet Union and China, illustrate how authoritarian regimes particularly favored these frontier “experiments" as testing grounds for resource extraction and radical development plans. Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular (Rutgers University) focused on the case study of Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina after the Berlin Congress (1878-1914), to highlight questions of subject agency in a transimperial setting. The overlap of Habsburg rule and Ottoman legal sovereignty shaped considerations of diplomatic and political relevance, while ambiguous legal boundaries created space for Bosnian Muslims to navigate the Ottoman and Habsburg realms and develop new relationships with Vienna and Istanbul. Transimperial and interimperial perspective provides a nuanced view of how empires navigated and projected their influence, and how the imperial image and power was shaped by transimperial actors, small and large. David Motzafi-Haller (Geneva Graduate Institute) showed how the advent of Israeli development in Africa in the 1960s coincided with the formal decolonization of the continent from multiple empires and with an unprecedented expansion in the availability of photography and travel. Drawing on the

photographs of a single family, the Gershonis, he analyzed the act of self-representation of so-called 'development experts' from Israel, and examined how categories of racial and gendered difference were renegotiated in an Israeli household in Africa.

In the concluding plenary discussion, conference participants raised a host of points for further consideration. These included the question of how scales work in transimperial histories, what varied social worlds do, and do not or less, get covered, and whether some empires may have a relatively larger weight in transimperial history and historiography than others, and why (Schayegh); how nationalisms, especially the connected ones of the long 19th century, might factor in transimperial histories (Miller); how one may study transimperial legacies and what weight to give to economic factors (von Hirschhausen); how to work with and think of the different "Cs"—including but not limited to competition, cooperation, and connectivity—that stand out in transimperial history (Hedinger); what differences there are between thinking of the transimperial as a method or perspective (Laqua); what the (also political) stakes are in and for transimperial history and how we can make sure that transimperial histories keep foregrounding assymetrical power relations, which is an inherent advantage, in principle, over global histories, which do so less (Kramer); how crucial it is for historians to define their working definitions of terms like "empire" and transimperial (Dimier; Suny); what we lose intellectually and politically when we write transimperial histories and what we gain, and who the "we" is (Hamed-Troyansky); and how to better foreground environmental histories in transimperial history (Bieling).