On 30 October 1918, on board the British warship HMS *Agamemnon* anchored off the island of Lemnos, an Ottoman delegation headed by the Navy Minister, Hussein Rauf Bey, signed an armistice agreement, bringing to a close the four years of bitter fighting that had raged across much of the Levant, Mesopotamia and Arabia. Nearly a month later, on 25 November, the commander of German forces in East Africa, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, led the remnants of his army to surrender in the Northern Rhodesian town of Abercorn. These two events neatly encapsulate the extent to which the imperial and extra-European dimensions of the First World War do not fit adequately within received conceptions of the conflict’s chronology. 11 November 1918, a seminal date in twentieth-century Western European history, is only a crude marker of the conclusion of one particular aspect of the war: the cessation of fighting on the Western Front, an event that had less resonance for those soldiers and civilians in Eastern Europe, the Middle East or Africa.

In many respects this is not a novel observation. Historians of the Ottoman Empire in particular have for decades argued that the opening and closing dates of the First World War had little applicability to the struggle faced by the Turks and their imperial subjects. From the Ottoman perspective, 1911 (the year in which Italy attacked Ottoman territories in North Africa and the Mediterranean) and 1923 (the year that the Treaty of Lausanne was signed) are far better markers, placing the First World War into more than a decade of inter- and intra-state violence and crises. The Balkan Wars after 1912 in particular heralded a tumultuous period of bloody imperial collapse as the Ottoman Empire shuddered under the exertions of numerous conflicts, only for a new Turkish nation state to emerge from the wreckage and be validated in the Treaty of Lausanne. The First World War is, in this interpretation, only a part of the puzzle of Ottoman imperial crisis, although the...
formative one in destroying the last vestiges of the empire’s legitimacy and giving birth to Mustafa Kemal’s nationalist regime.

The Ottoman experience was by no means unique: when the First World War formally ended in late 1918 with an Allied victory, three vast and centuries-old land empires – the Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov empires – vanished from the map. A fourth – the Hohenzollern empire, which had become a major land empire in the last year of the war when it occupied enormous territories in East-Central Europe – was significantly reduced in size, stripped of its overseas colonies and transformed into a parliamentary democracy with what Germans across the political spectrum referred to as a «bleeding frontier» towards the East. Imperial Russia, whose transformation into a Soviet «empire in disguise» is discussed in Felix Schnell’s contribution to this special issue, is a particularly extreme example of violent imperial collapse. But the victorious Western European empires were not unaffected by the cataclysm of war either: throughout the «interwar» period, France fought back resistance to its imperial ambitions in Algeria, Syria, Indochina, and Morocco, while British imperial rule was challenged in Ireland, Egypt, India, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Burma.

John Gallagher, one of the seminal historians of British imperialism during the second half of the twentieth century, was the first to raise conceptual concerns about the manner in which the British Empire experienced the closing stages of the First World War and its immediate aftermath. In a concise article in Modern Asian Studies, published in 1981 a year after his death, Gallagher pointed to the period 1919–1922 as that in which the bonds of empire came under greatest strain. After all in these years that the British faced one of their most significant imperial challenges, with a widespread, deeply rooted, violent, and ultimately successful nationalist insurgency in Ireland. The Irish experience raises interesting questions about how the British Empire and other European empires, both defeated and victorious, transferred from the upheavals of wartime to the supposed calm of the interwar peace. More importantly, it provides a striking contrast to those interpretations of the First World War that see Britain as an unalloyed victorious power at the conflict’s close. Having sustained a European and global war effort for over four years, it is striking that Lloyd George’s government could not hold onto its closest (both geographically and, in some respects, culturally) imperial possession.

1919–1922 witnessed myriad challenges to the imperial system from a variety of nationalist groups, spanning the territorial range of the British Empire. Spring 1919 was particularly unstable, with revolution in Egypt in March, followed by civil unrest in the Punjab in April, and then a war with Afghanistan in May, all of which


3 A good example of this historiographical interpretation is G. Sheffield, Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myths and Realities, London 2001.
engaged British and Indian military forces on a considerable scale. By the end of 1919 Lord Curzon's attempt to lean on the Persians to force through a new treaty had run into sustained resistance. Less violent solutions to the turmoil of the post-war world were also failing to produce results. During 1920 Mesopotamia exploded in tribal unrest, further testing the ability of the British military to dash from one imperial crisis to another. At the same time Curzon and Lloyd George, often against military advice, encouraged the expansion of the British Army's commitments to unheard of levels. Troops were now occupying parts of the Caucasus in an attempt to ward of Bolshevik aggression, prop up local post-Tsarist breakaway regimes and secure wider strategic concerns. To cap all this, the traditional base of Britain's empire in India appeared to be under threat as the Punjab disturbances metamorphosed into Gandhi's powerful non-cooperation movement. Combined with the rising discord among India's Muslims, expressed via the Khalifat campaign, the legitimacy of the Raj appeared to be waning. As Gallagher pithily suggested, just as the British Empire became truly global so the sun never set on its myriad crises.

The crisis of empire conception of the post-war world reflected a number of the key ideas that ran throughout Gallagher's work. This was not just a story of economic retrenchment and military overstretch, but of an attempt to impose a conception of imperialism that was becoming increasingly obsolescent by 1918. In Egypt, India and Mesopotamia at the very least, a system of influence was being replaced by one predominantly of rule, provoking an anti-colonial backlash from subject populations who baulked at the growth of the colonial state and its numerous intrusions into their daily lives. The 1919–1922 crisis reflected Gallagher's foregrounding of India as the principal strategic concern that drove British imperial policy. Victory in 1918 had turned the Indian Ocean into a British lake and gifted Britain large proportions of the Middle East which could act as a buffer to protect the Raj from external threats. Much of Curzon's drive to build British influence in Central Asia was motivated by a concern to ensure that Britain remained the eternal master in India, a suitably fitting reward for the exertions of the First World War. This obsession with external security resulted in the neglect of internal threats to the legitimacy of the Raj, and thus made the upsurge of popular unrest in 1919–1924 even more shocking for both Delhi and London. Gallagher's

conception of imperial crisis was one that saw the post-war revolutions, protests and imperial campaigns as interlinked. They could only be understood as part of a whole, with consequences that contributed to the insecurities of the wider British world system.

As much as being a real crisis of nationalist demonstrators facing off against nervous soldiers and colonial policemen, 1919–1922 was also a period that witnessed a clear crisis of the «official mind» among the policy-making elite. Individuals such as Henry Wilson were at times prone to seeing a global conspiracy ready to topple British power and influence. At times this international challenge took the form of Bolshevism, at others it was a product of militant Islam, and often it was the menace of pan-Turkism. The power of the crisis moment over the official mind derived in part from the conflation of crises on the imperial periphery with those in the metropole, particularly industrial unrest. The Irish War of Independence brought imperial and domestic threats together, with a guerrilla war being played out only a few hundred miles away from Whitehall. Irish republican violence was also translated back to the metropole, most shockingly with the assassination in June 1922 of Wilson outside his London home.

The confusion of the British official mind in the wake of the First World War was mirrored in France, where the Foreign and Colonial Ministries only had a limited grasp over how the conflict would affect French colonial expansion. The sizeable colonialist lobby, which grew with the election of the «sky-blue» chamber of 1919, and a few interested officials were prominent in driving forwards colonial policy. Government ministers, in particular Georges Clemenceau, showed little inclination to delve into the minutiae of the imperial questions opened up by the war. The focus was instead on the construction of a European peace; if France could be secured against future German aggression then the empire would also be protected. Without full government support the colonialist dreams of ruling over «la Syrie intégrale» and challenging the growing British hegemony in the Middle East could not be realised. If there was a crisis of the French official mind over imperialism in the wake of the Great War it was very much within the metropole, rather than on the peripheries of empire as in the British case. As for much of the nineteenth-century colonial expansion in the French Empire was still driven by individual administrators and military officers on the spot, such as General

Henri Gouraud, who defeated Prince Feisal’s meagre army at the battle of Maysalun in July 1920 and went on to build the foundations of the French mandatory regime in Syria.¹¹

The origins of anti-colonial nationalist protest in the wake of the First World War can be better explained by adopting a transnational approach. As Erez Manela has suggested, the challenge to imperialism was not a direct product of the conflict, but of the failure of the victorious powers and the peace-making process at Versailles to address the concerns of various subject peoples.¹² The period from autumn 1918 to the following spring witnessed the domination of international debate by the ideas of Woodrow Wilson, most importantly his concept of national self-determination. For anti-colonial activists in Egypt, India, China, and Korea Wilson’s conception of a new global order in which subject peoples would have a voice was an appealing one. The striking element of this «Wilsonian moment» was its fleeting nature; theVersailles negotiations and resulting treaty demonstrated that great power politics would remain relatively unchanged. The victorious powers concentrated on restoring peace within Europe and left the colonial empires dominant outside Europe and in many respects with their positions enhanced.¹³ It was this failure of Wilsonianism that, in Manela’s estimation, produced a wave of unrest in spring 1919, with revolution in Egypt, Gandhi’s non-violent resistance in India, the May 4th Movement in China, and the March 1st Movement in Korea. Anti-colonial nationalist leaders and activists, men such as Sa’ad Zaghlul or Lala Lajpat Rai, were self-consciously transnational actors, disseminating ideas beyond the confines of the colonial state, making their case on the international stage, and helping to build movements that were international in their aims.

Manela’s global conception of imperial crisis provides a useful point of departure for the articles presented in this volume. A transnational perspective helps to break the mould of a British paradigm on the post-war imperial crisis, no longer seeing it solely as an affliction of the British world system, nor as a concept focused on the machinations of metropolitan politicians and civil servants. Instead, it is clear that a series of crises were playing out in the wake of the First World War across multiple imperial spaces, and that these too were interlinked. From 1917 onwards empire as a conception of how to manage geographical space and subject peoples appeared to be falling out of fashion, subject to the criticisms of both Lenin

and Wilson. The conclusion of the conflict and ensuing revolutionary upheavals within East-Central Europe confirmed the collapse of the multi-ethnic dynastic empires that had dominated for centuries. Indeed, the crisis of the official mind that was so evident in Whitehall in 1919–1922 was in part merely a reflection of the fact that the immediate post-war world was one in which empires appeared to be being torn apart by their subject populations. It did not require much imagination to extend this crisis moment from the European to the extra-European world. An element shared between the actors who appear in all of the articles here is exactly this broad conception of imperial space. Whether African labourers transported far from their homes to serve the British military campaign in East Africa or post-war insurgents in the Levant schooled in the Ottoman military education system, the individuals who experienced wartime and post-war imperial crisis did not do so within narrow geographical confines.

Gallagher’s crisis of empire thesis raises a series of questions that need to be addressed in light of the intervening three decades of scholarship on the Great War and its legacy. First, what were the origins of the crisis that faced the imperial world after 1918, and how deeply rooted were they in the First World War’s mobilisation of colonial subjects? Second, to what extent was the crisis of empire a British phenomenon, confined to only one imperial system? Third, and related to the issue of its national character, is the question of whether the crisis had really ended by 1922, a terminal date that Gallagher fixed on as it marked the calming of the Irish problem. Did a state of crisis mark colonial relations throughout the interwar years? Finally, how did colonial regimes, often willing to use violent repression, respond to this crisis period, and what was the lived experience of colonial policing for both the practitioners and the victims?

This special issue seeks to broaden the geographical approach to the notion of imperial crisis in the wake of the First World War. It includes one contribution, that of James Kitchen, which re-examines a core moment of upheaval within Gallagher’s original framework, that of the 1919 Egyptian revolution. The other papers encompass a wider range of imperial spaces and the crises they experienced, reflecting and developing the ideas Gallagher first raised. Timothy Parsons’s discussion of wartime mobilisation in Britain’s African colonies and Matthew Hughes’s examination of interwar policing in mandatory Palestine both deal with British colonial territories, but areas that have often been seen as distinct from the wider narrative on wartime and post-war crisis, which has tended to revolve around India and the strategic routes that supported the Raj.

Complementing the essays on Africa and the Middle East, two essays deal with the defeated European land empires. Felix Schnell’s essay and that of Uğur Ümit Üngör and Robert Gerwarth draw attention to three of the empires that did collapse between 1917 and 1923, often (though not always) amidst massive waves of post-war violence: Imperial Russia and the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires.
All of the papers in this special edition open up deeper questions on the mutable nature of imperial space, which for much of the first half of the twentieth century was continually being refashioned. As Ann Stoller has argued, it may be better to reconceptualise empires, often seen as monolithic state structures, as «imperial formations» which were in a constant state of flux.¹⁴ These were not fixed entities, but ones in which conceptions of imperial identity were being negotiated and contested.

Challenges to colonial regimes from subject populations also reveal the extent to which new «national» communities were being forged in opposition to the European colonial powers in the interwar years. As the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–1926 demonstrated, supposed national movements were often riddled with factional infighting and ideological inconsistencies.¹⁵ The links between the groups that revolved around Michel Lutfallah and Shakib Arslan in the early 1920s were tenuous at best, only operating as a function of opposition to the French colonial «other». As the French in Syria demonstrated, nationalist divisions were exploited by the colonial powers who picked off cooperative, «moderate» nationalists with whom they felt they could negotiate and ultimately manipulate. The anti-colonial nationalism that Gallagher and Manela portray as a product of the Great War and Wilsonian failure was in many colonial territories an inchoate force; Egypt and India with mass national movements whose origins lay in the late nineteenth century were exceptions in the colonial world of 1918–1919, rather than exemplars. The interwar years with their various imperial crises for France and Britain thus witnessed both the development of new colonial regimes via the mandate system and the forging of new anti-colonial nationalist movements in response to the changes developing in the colonial relationship.

The end of the Great War in 1918 thus augured a new world of sharp contradictions. Empires both disintegrated and expanded, and while violence ended on the Western Front and in some other theatres, it continued unabated and sometimes even intensified elsewhere. In much of the former territories of the Habsburgs, the Romanovs and the Ottomans, the blood continued to flow freely for years after as violent upheavals, pogroms and civil wars remained a characteristic feature of life in post-war Europe.¹⁶

In imperial domains beyond Europe post-war violence, while not nearly as massive as it was on the continent, was nevertheless widespread; even where there was little violence the imperial edifice was often knocked off balance. Indeed, by the time of the Paris peace conference, the relationship between the white dominions and the British Empire had fundamentally changed. For Canada and South Africa the pressing problem of appeasing large, disgruntled non-British ethnic communities, further embittered by the war, drove the mobilisation of nationalist sentiment as the ideological glue to keep these fragile polities together in the immediate post-war years. In both these dominions nationalism was articulated around moving away from the empire: more republican, self-sufficient and grounded in a sense of cultural difference from the British.  

In Australia and New Zealand, however, post-war nationalism was equally strong but in contrast oriented around the twin themes of national maturity and empire loyalty. Far from nationalism being the antithesis of empire, as in other settler dominions, in Australia and New Zealand, nation and empire, were inextricably linked. The bloodshed of Anzac troops at Gallipoli in particular maintains its central position in Australian and New Zealand collective memory as the violent passage to nationhood, but also as proof of the bond between «Anglo-Saxon» settlers and the imperial motherland.

If the crisis of empire had a rather mixed impact in the white dominions, its effects across non-white territories was far more consistent in its destabilising impact on imperial legitimacy and authority. As Britain’s imperial managers strained to restore order and contain cascading crises across their old domains, they also struggled to shape and control the new territories they acquired as a result of the war, especially those detached from the defunct Ottoman Empire and awarded to the British Empire under the novel arrangement of the League of Nations mandate.

The French mandates proved even more troublesome in the interwar period, as did other parts of the French Empire: serious uprisings against French colonial rule included the Rif War (1925–1926), the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1926), the Kongo War in French Equatorial Africa (1928–1931), and the Yen Bay mutiny in Indochina (1930–1931). It is clear that the encounter of colonial workers and troupes...
with Europe’s competing political, social and economic ideologies (socialism, syndicalism and communism among them), began to have an effect in many French colonies. Wilson’s call for self-determination famously inspired Ho Chi Minh to inquire about the concept’s applicability to colonial possessions outside Europe. In Africa, meanwhile, prominent political figures like Blaise Diagne exploited the rhetoric and ideals of French universalism and egalitarianism to carve out an enhanced role for non-white people within the French Empire while in restive North Africa, Messali Hadj’s nationalist organisation, the Étoile Nord-Africaine, in the later 1920s challenged the legitimacy of the colonial state and cultivated links with international anti-colonialism through the Ligue contre l’impérialisme et l’oppression coloniale, formed in 1927.

To be sure, the vast majority of African veterans did not rise against their colonial masters. As Gregory Mann has shown in the case of ex-tirailleurs in Mali after both world wars, veterans often suffered frustration when the full promise of their service was not realised (in the form of preferential treatment, employment, pensions, and even citizenship). Yet they often framed their demands to colonial authorities in a language of reciprocity that did not necessarily call into question the colonial order. In fact, even if sometimes «unruly clients» of the French state, veterans could be rather conservative, since they themselves had invested so much in that order, and thereby hoped to gain from it.21

The imperial crises that followed the First World War were not therefore simply an early twentieth-century harbinger, or trial run, of the waves of decolonisation that would sweep the colonial world after 1945. It would take a second all-consuming and truly global struggle to break the power of the European colonial empires. Instead the imperial crises stemming from the First World War and lasting long into the interwar period are better seen within a narrative of mobilisation and demobilisation. The turmoil experienced in France and Britain’s African colonies, across much of the former Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, in Egypt, and in the Indian subcontinent revealed the difficulties inherent in mobilising colonial subject populations to fight a «total war». The legacy of this mobilisation was a colonial world that never fully demobilised after November 1918, with the colonial state nervously preparing for the next crisis and a raft of anti-colonial movements preparing to provoke and exploit unrest.

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