With the fifth Star Wars’ Episode, *The Empire strikes back*, the popularity of the Science Fiction genre reached a new climax. The Oscar-winning film of 1980 showed the soldiers of the Galactic Empire pursuing the Rebel Alliance under Commander Luke Skywalker across the galaxy. Yet even the imperial forces’ fiercest attacks did not succeed in knocking Skywalker’s imaginative team out of the galaxy. In the end they gained a victory in a galactic battle.\(^2\) The enormous popularity which the movie enjoyed around the globe certainly had to do with a clear dichotomy of good and evil: Whereas the dark forces of the empire appear as incarnations of evil, the anti-imperial Rebel Alliance and its shining heroes are symbolic of the good.

The view that empires per se are a rather bad thing and the fact that the film evokes images of the asymmetrical fight between David and Goliath, is not just a modern perception. Academic research has for a long time operated with negative connotations of empires and thus shaped our image of many historic empires. Against the background of political, economic and social macro-processes since the early nineteenth century, the complex structures of Europe’s multi-ethnic empires have mostly been seen as inferior to the apparently homogeneous and efficient nation state with its promise of external strength and internal unity through participation of all citizens. This model seemed to correspond so much better to the premises of modernisation theories of the last decades which assumed that tradi-

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tional – religious, local or dynastic – loyalties would gradually be replaced by the dominating paradigms of nation and nation state. In this view, multi-ethnicity also served as a historic argument to explain the perceived backwardness and anachronistic character of empires if compared with the apparently unstoppable progress of ethnically homogeneous nation states. The common focus on the dissolution of the European empires as a consequence of the First World War further strengthened notions of unavoidable decline, which manifested in the paradigmatic formulae of «rise and fall», thereby applying Edward Gibbon’s historiographic model to the complexities of imperial structures in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Against the background of Germany’s historical experiences of empires, ranging from the Holy Roman Empire’s legacy to the Second Empire of 1871 to the Third Reich, German historiography showed an ideological restraint towards imperial rule and imperial elites which explains the tendency to neglect empires as objects of historical research. Only very recently, new attempts have been made to better understand the concept of empire and to transcend the paradigm of the nation state in order to apply the transnational character of political, economic or social processes to the Second German Empire.

After a long dominance of nation and nation states, empires seem to be back on the agenda. The political upheavals of 1989/90 and the end of the Cold War questioned established paradigms and led to a spectrum of contradictory experiences: On the one hand the dissolution of the Soviet Union generated a number of new nation states in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. On the other hand, through an ongoing process of institutional Europeanisation as well as economic

3 Particularly illustrative is the antagonism between empire and nation state in the classic work of E. Gellner, according to which industrialisation enabled the peasants of Ruritania to form a nation directed against the Empire Megalomania, see idem., Nations and Nationalism (Oxford, 1983); see also A. D. Smith, Nationalism (Oxford, 2001); idem., Nationalism and Modernism. A critical survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism (5th edn. London, 2001); E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Program, myth, reality (Cambridge, 1990); B. Anderson, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London, 1983); J. Breuilly, Nationalism and the State (2nd edn. Manchester, 1993); for the older influential literature see H. Kohn, The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in its Origin and Background (New York, 1946); E. Lemberg, Nationalismus, 2 vols. (Reinbek, 1964); K. Deutsch, Nationalism and Social Communication (New York, 1953); M. Hroch, Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas (Prague, 1968).


and cultural globalisation, the notion of the nation state has lost much of its credibility. On a third level the outburst of extreme ethnic violence in the former parts of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia underlined the problem of how states could accommodate ethnic plurality. Finally, the end of the dichotomy based on the Cold War gave way to a new international strategy of the United States to maintain and partly expand its international engagement in a world where conflicts were no longer structured along the Cold War bipolarity but have become asymmetrically dislocated. The role of the United States as the last remaining empire has provoked controversial discussions on chances and limits of empires in past and present. For all these debates the re-discovery and re-interpretation of past empires have become an important point of orientation.

These developments have thus catalysed a new interest in historical alternatives beyond the nation and nation state, not only for academic historians but also for a wider public, thereby explaining the focus on European empires since the early modern period. In contrast to the premise of unavoidable disintegration and decay, which were dominating for a long time, the present analytical focus is rather on the questions why these empires lasted for so long, how they could function fairly successfully, in which ways they contributed to a relative stability of the international order between 1815 and 1914, and where the limits of their potential for integration became obvious. There is, in short, a clear shift from the paradigm of «rise and fall» towards the question of chances and crises. Which mechanisms of integration and exclusion provided stability? How did this balance change when it became confronted with the new model of the nation state in the course of the nineteenth century? In which ways did the empires and their multi-ethnic societies respond to this dynamic competition? Did the historical empires really strike back, or does our renewed interest rather show the complexities and insecurities of the present which result in the search for old answers to new constellations?

A particularly revealing example to analyse the relation between multi-ethnic empires and nation states in the nineteenth and twentieth century is the model of the nation in arms and universal conscription. The supposed efficiency and motivation of a mass conscript army (which for contemporary observers had been

7 New states and old conflicts. Nationalism and state formation in the former Yugoslavia, National European Centre Papers 2 (Canberra, 2002).
8 For a critical assessment see Münkler, Imperien; M. Hardt and A. Negri, Empire (Cambridge, 2000).
proven in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars between 1792 and 1815, and in the «national wars» of Piemont and France against Habsburg in 1859 as well as during the three Wars of German Unification between 1864 and 1871) put the continental European Empires under growing pressure. Russia’s devastating defeat in the Crimean War of 1854/55, the Habsburg Monarchy’s failure in 1859 and against Prussia in 1866, as well as the Ottoman Empire’s sequence of military catastrophes in the 1870s and again during the Balkan Wars, were of pivotal importance for the discussion for and against universal conscription in all these empires. Even the British Empire with her traditional focus on the navy and a small professional army of volunteers did not remain untouched by these debates, particularly after the experience of the Boer War as an imperial war. With the exception of Britain, which introduced general conscription only in 1916, all three continental Empires followed the German and French example and introduced conscription from the 1860s onwards.

The way in which these four European empires responded to the model of a nation in arms forms the central question of the following contributions with individual analyses of the Habsburg Monarchy, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire. This opening essay is meant to introduce the general analytical problems of comparing multi-ethnic empires, to reconstruct the origins of the nation in arms model and to develop a framework for comparison. It is therefore divided into three parts. It initially introduces definitions of empire and ethnicity, thereby developing a basis for the comparison, and gives a short overview of the state of research regarding comparisons between empires and the relation between empires and their military. Secondly, it analyses the origins of the concept of a nation in arms against the background of state-building, nation-building and war experiences since the late eighteenth century. Thirdly, it develops a preliminary and symptomatic comparison between the four empires on the basis of four criteria. Finally some observations for future comparisons between empires are derived from the empirical analyses.

What is called «empire» today has come to embrace almost all spheres of popular life and academic discourse. The inflationary use of the word is reflected by the sheer quantity of entries in the global search-machine google: More than 100,000,000 links are available to follow the endless meanings and contexts of empire. Corresponding to this quantitative inflation is the qualitative spread. The meanings of empire and imperialism in everyday language have become so unlimited that Stephen Howe could come to the conclusion that «imperialism has gone imperial, colonialism has colonised our language.»11

A similar tendency can be observed in academic discourses. Ideas about empire and imperialism have spread not only within the disciplines of political science and history, but also into economics, anthropology, literary studies and theology, to name but a few. The various meanings these concepts have absorbed in various contexts have further complicated the matter, above all through their repeated connection with other highly contested concepts such as colonialism, post-colonialism, globalisation and very recently neo-liberalism. At the core of the semantic spectrum there is one observation which most of these meanings seem to have in common: They denote a relation between a more powerful agency of rule and less powerful subsystems, and they consider this relation problematic and negative. Like with so many other concepts which contain in themselves a whole history of semantic change and therefore evade any isolated definition, the increasing inflation of connotations and usages has reduced the analytical value of empire. This has consequences for any comparative analysis, which must be founded on a more clear-cut and rather narrow definition of the term in order to allow a sensible implementation of analytical operations. Against this background the reflections on the following definition follow the works of the British political scientist Stephen Howe and the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel. Five central criteria are considered typical and fundamental elements of modern empires: Firstly, such empires were composite states, in that they comprised various heterogeneous territories with distinct, often differing legal status as consequences of historic conquest and amalgamation. They were, secondly, characterised by a multi-ethnic population, thirdly, by supranational rule, and fourthly by soft frontiers, fluctuating border zones and more or less constantly changing geographical boundaries. A fifth factor referred to a distinctive interrelation of centre and periphery, which was not static but could change over time. This relation was not only one of geographical location, political power or economic dependency, but perceived by the contemporaries also as one of cultural difference, mostly between a dominant, superior core and a subordinate, often inferior periphery.

As a central element of this definition, multi-ethnicity deserves a closer look not least because its analytical connotation has considerably changed over the last
decades.\footnote{16} Whereas German historiography has not paid much attention to the phenomenon, considering it rather an exception than normality,\footnote{17} Anglo-American historians and political scientists, stimulated by their imperial legacy, the multi-ethnic structures of their own societies and the impact of post-colonial studies, have started much earlier to respond to the analytical challenges of multi-ethnicity.\footnote{18} American intellectuals have been discussing concepts of multiculturalism already for some thirty years\footnote{19} and have come to extend their focus also to analyses of Central and Eastern Europe.\footnote{20} British historiography on the British Empire shows a major turn from economic and classic political history to cultural aspects and the complex interaction between British and colonial societies. It has also long detached itself from the Whig interpretation of (English) history and focuses more and more on the history of «four nations and three kingdoms.»\footnote{21} In many other European cases one can see a similar application of ethnicity and multiculturalism to national narratives.\footnote{22}

This general tendency has contributed to a different notion of ethnicity which has stimulated a lot of recent research.\footnote{23} According to these views, ethnicity does not primarily denote attributes of a group which are considered «objective»;\footnote{24} It rather refers to the subjective notion of otherness, of the perception of difference in comparison with surrounding groups. This notion can be founded on a common language, on culture, religion, descent or even on nothing else than invented traditions, as long as it serves to integrate a group. Such integration has an internal and

\footnotesize{16} In contrast to most historians, German political scientist H. Münkler in his influential book *Imperien* does not name multi-ethnicity as a significant feature of empires, see idem, *Imperien*, 28–29.


\footnotesize{23} The trend is also reflected in the publication of a new journal devoted exclusively to the topic: *Ethnicities*, published since 2001.

\footnotesize{24} W. Connors, *Ethnonationalism. The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, 1994).}
an external dimension, and it is not to be seen as a static constellation, but rather as a process of contact and interaction. This definition of ethnicity, which seems adequate for comparative analyses of empires, is therefore linked to both particular self images and to competing groups: «For ethnicity, to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no ethnicity, for ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group. Only in so far as cultural differences are perceived as being important, and are made socially relevant, do social relationships have an ethnic element.»

The new interest in empires and their ethnic plurality, fostered by a conceptual turn towards transnational history, is reflected in numerous recent publications. For the Habsburg Monarchy, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire, several relevant studies have been published. Research on the British Empire however is certainly most advanced because it had already been an established historical sub-discipline, and it has enormously benefitted from innovative approaches in methodological and conceptual respects. Yet despite these publications on the single empires, systematic comparisons between the modern European empires have so far been the exception. This seems to repeat the development of historiography of nations and nation states: Some thirty years ago such research was usually limited to the borders – and historians – of each national society, and only later developed a comparative interest which soon transcended the national boundaries of historical analysis. Similarly, comparative empire research today is far from a common approach. Although Liah Greenfeld in her book «Five

26 G. Budde et al., eds., Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien (Göttingen, 2006).
31 Yet there are at least several works comparing two empires either within Eastern Europe or Western Europe, see R. Rudolph and D. Good, eds., Nationalism and Empire: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union (New York, 1992); P. F. Sugar, Nationality and Society in Habsburg and Ottoman Europe (Aldershot, 1997); M. Kurz et al., eds., Das Osmanische Reich und die Habsburgermonarchie in der Neuzeit (Munich, 2005); A. Miller and A. Rieber, eds., Imperial Rule (Budapest, 2004); F. Bosbach and H. Hiery, eds., Imperium, Empire, Reich: Ein Konzept politischer Herrschaft im deutsch-britischen Vergleich (Munich, 1999); J. Hart, Comparing Empires (London, 2003).
32 For an overview on comparative analyses of European nationalisms see U. von Hirschhausen and
roads to Modernity compared England, France, Germany, Russia and the USA, her analysis focused not on their imperial character, but on the various nationalisms in these states. A valuable contribution has been made by Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen with their volume *After Empire* in which they highlight the problems and legacies of multi-ethnic empires in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Very important is Dominic Lieven’s work on the expansion and decline of Russia, which includes valuable comparative aspects on the Habsburg Monarchy as well as on the Ottoman and British Empire. In 2001 Aviel Roshwald published a study which compared imperial war experiences such as occupation, desertion or ethnic resistance on the military and the home front, in Central Eastern Europe and the Middle East during the First World War thereby demonstrating the potential of such comparative approaches.

These few publications reflect general trends of the current historiography on empires. Two aspects seem particularly significant: comparative analyses on empires still tend to be separated along traditional borders between Western and Eastern Europe. What is almost completely lacking is the attempt to go beyond the *Iron Curtain* still existing between Western and Eastern European historiography. Europe’s past, which owes so much to its empires and less to the comparatively late development of nation states, seems to still fall apart in two historical and analytical spheres.

A second feature of comparative empire research is the focus on static structures, leaving aside the various interactions and transfers between the empires. The complexity of each empire’s political, economic, social and cultural structure has certainly contributed to this primary focus on individual cases. A closer look at transfer phenomena, the perception of other political, social or military models, as presented in this issue of JMEH, could fruitfully be applied to the analysis of empires. The transfer of knowledge, people or concepts, which imperial elites
increasingly pursued across the empires’ borders, has not been taken into sufficient consideration so far. Some initial research indicates that such transfers did not only have an important impact on controlling and containing international conflicts in an era of growing competition between London, Vienna, St. Petersburg and Istanbul, but were also extended to political cultures and the way in which imperial self images were communicated.39

These aspects of comparative empire historiography have also left their stamp on current research on the relation between empires and their military. The fresh impulses of the new military history with its focus on social, cultural and gender questions, has been demonstrated in a number of innovative studies.40 Their thematic center is still the Western European nation state, where universal conscription formed an integral part of the interrelated paradigm of national defence and participation. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea of universal conscription became a growing challenge to Europe’s multi-ethnic empires. How the officer corps of the Austrian-Hungarian army responded to the challenges of nationalism has been analysed by Istvan Deák.41 Yet much less is known of the effects conscription had on the disposition of the conscripts in the Habsburg Monarchy’s army, a topic which Christa Hämmerle treats in her article for this issue. A new interest in universal conscription in Tsarist Russia has yielded in two recent monographs. One of the authors, Werner Benecke, deploys functions and dysfunctions of the Russian conscript army for this issue.42 For the Ottoman Empire, a number of analyses exist which investigate questions of military, conscript and reform politics in the nineteenth century.43 Mehmet Hacisalihoğlu’s


42 J. A. Sanborn, Drafting the Russian Nation. Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics 1905–1925 (DeKalb, 2005); W. Benecke, Militär und Gesellschaft im Russischen Reich. Die Geschichte der Allgemeinen Wehrpflicht 1874–1914 (Paderborn, 2006).

analysis stands in this context. In Great Britain, which only introduced general conscription during World War I, the debates on imperial defence and conscription, which Jörn Leonhard analyses in his paper, reflect the specific predicaments of integration between the British Empire and the Union of Great Britain which become obvious in the special role of the Irish in this context.44

The general tendency of historiography to isolate developments of individual empires from each other has also influenced the research on military, conscription and empire, as this short comment tried to show. The contributions of this issue, almost all based on primary research, aim at demonstrating that the empires’ reaction to the nation in arms and universal conscript were no isolated phenomena. Furthermore the topic’s comparative dimension allows innovative insights into the complexity of multi-ethnic empires and the changing frameworks of integration and disintegration.

2. State-building, Nation-building and War Experiences: The Evolution of the Model of a Nation in Arms

The modern concepts of nation and nation state were inextricably linked with experiences of war.45 This is not only true from a German or an Italian perspective, that is to say from the perspective of successful external nation building through wars, be it between 1859 and 1861 in the Italian case or between 1864 and 1871 in the German case.46 The long-term process of state building, in the course of which Europe’s political map changed dramatically from the early modern period to the First World War, can also be described as a history of warfare and its revolutionary impacts. Most of the numerous territorial states of the early modern period did not survive this violent restructuring of Europe. Between the last third of the eighteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century the number decreased from about 500 units around 1500 to about 20 states around 1900. State-building,


much intensified between 1794 and 1815, was directly linked to the experience of wars, and the British war-state of the eighteenth century is a particular illustration.\textsuperscript{47} It mostly affected smaller units, it accompanied the establishment of new nation states, but it left the multi-ethnic empires more or less intact. As a part of this complex process, justifications of war changed, pointing to the new meaning of nation and nation state as dominant paradigms of political and social legitimacy.\textsuperscript{48}

But war not only accompanied the external processes of state-building. It also represented, from the 1750s onwards, a possible means of political emancipation and participation and hence became part of internal nation-building. War changed its character from a merely dynastic affair and a cabinet war, fought with hired mercenaries from different countries who did not identify with an abstract notion of nation, to a war fought, in theory at least, in the name of the whole nation and fought by the whole nation in arms. On the one hand, and since the last third of the eighteenth century, new forms of \textit{national wars} or \textit{people’s wars}, in particular the American War of Independence and then the French Revolutionary Wars after 1792, meant that more groups of society were now directly affected by war. Warfare based upon mass armies and collective conscription transcended the traditional separation of the civil population from the direct experience of violent conflict, as had been the aim of traditional cabinet wars since the mid-seventeenth century, fought in the name of monarchical, dynastic and territorial interests, and avoiding at the same time the horrors of civil war as they had been experienced in the confessional wars of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{49} On the other hand, national wars strengthened the state’s legitimacy as the only dominating institution which could provide the financial and military means of warfare.

A war fought in the name of the entire nation provoked hitherto unknown expectations of political and social participation. That became obvious in the course of the later eighteenth century, and it became an essential aspect of the new concept of a nation in arms. The transformation from the traditional corporatist structures and privileged estates of the European Ancien régime, from a society of feudal subjects, to a society based on the concept of the free and legally equal citizen was linked to, and partly even caused by, experiences of war. This ambivalence of war – externally as a form of collective aggression and violence and, internally, as a means of political and social emancipation – was also reflected in the political and social institutions which were established and transformed during these wars.\textsuperscript{50}


of participation – is not just the result of the historian’s retrospective causality. It already played a major role in contemporary war discourses and controversies over the precise meaning and possible justification of war.\(^50\) Thus, the concept of civil war, so dominant in the critical periods of the seventeenth century with its religious conflicts in various European societies, found its way back into justifications of war after 1750. But in contrast to the seventeenth century, it was now no longer a civil war caused by confessional conflicts, but fought in the light of the secular concepts of liberty and equality as derived from the philosophy of human rights. Already in the 1760s the French philosopher Abbé Mably described the expansionist wars of the eighteenth century as the natural consequence of monarchical despotism. This justified a new and international civil war of all suppressed peoples against their monarchical oppressors. Mably regarded such an international civil war as a «bien», legitimising in this context the «nation militaire».

During the French Revolution and the subsequent wars from 1792 to 1815 such ideas assumed a new significance. However, the wars of this period soon demonstrated that the paradigm of an international and revolutionary civil war of all suppressed peoples against their despotic suppressors was soon replaced by national wars between distinct states. Conflicts from the 1790s onwards therefore marked a middle position between traditional cabinet wars that had characterised European history since the end of the Thirty Years War and a new concept of civil war in the name of abstract principles.\(^51\)

The ambivalent complexity of war experiences became more obvious in the course of the nineteenth century: On the one hand, the wars of the nineteenth century were in many ways still fought according to the rules of traditional cabinet wars, although the wars of the 1860s clearly showed signs of transformation from Clausewitz’s «absolute war» into «total war».\(^53\) On the other hand, these wars reflected, in theory at least, each individual fighter’s identification with a more abstract notion of nationality and nation. This justification of war was clearly a legacy of the civil war paradigm as revived through the experiences in America and France since the last third of the eighteenth century. If the contemporary concept of national war pointed already to the connection between the citizen’s duty to defend the fatherland and his recognition as a politically participating subject, then the


\(^{51}\) G. Bonnot, Abbé de Mably, Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen (Kell, 1786). 93–94.


people’s war transcended this connotation even further.\textsuperscript{54} Already during the 1760s and 1770s many American writers had referred to the war against the British as a «people’s war», representing a people’s ability to organise and mobilise its military in the absence of a monarchical state and at the same time challenging the traditional state’s monopoly of arms.\textsuperscript{55} In France the prospect of a revolutionary people’s war was also seen and perceived as a potential threat by the new revolutionary regimes after 1792. The regimes therefore responded with deliberate attempts to control and channel this development.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the discovery of the new nation in arms generated distinct forms of warfare. Three ideal types can be distinguished: firstly, guerilla warfare stood for the ideal type of people’s war. Following the collapse or the paralysation of a state’s authority, it was the population that now organised and carried out military actions, but not in traditional battles but rather in small, individual actions, exemplified by the Spanish guerilla war against Napoleonic regular troops in 1808. Second, militia armies combined the two principles of voluntary service with that of state control and professional military leadership in order to fight larger battles and to use the mass mobilisation of nations in arms. The American War of Independence as well as the early years of the French Revolutionary Wars after 1792 provide examples for this type. Thirdly, mass conscript armies stood for the attempt to fully control and regulate popular mobilisation for war. It provided the military and fiscal state with enormous power resources. The principle of conscription as a means of defending the whole nation also justified the use of force necessary to overcome popular resistance against the rigours of compulsory military service. France (during the Napoleonic Empire) and Prussia (from the early nineteenth century onwards) exemplified this type.\textsuperscript{56} However, mass conscription did not mean an equal share of the burden of military service. Despite the myth of the revolutionary citizen soldier, the French system allowed many exemptions, and the Napoleonic armies were far from mass


conscript armies integrating the whole nation in arms. Prussia, during the anti-
Napoleonic wars, came much closer to the ideal of mass conscription without
exemptions. Yet in comparison with France, the Prussian military reforms under
Scharnhorst and Gneisenau never did result in a realistic promise of political
participation in return for military service. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars,
European governments were keen to return to professional armies which were
regarded as safer tools against the revolutionary contagion of arming the people.
France and the German states after 1815 were particularly distinctive examples of
that type. It was only in the context of further military reforms and against the
background of industrialisation after 1850 that conscription became an option
again, as the European wars in the 1850s, 1860s and early 1870s demonstrated.
However, the examples of 1859, 1866 and 1870/71 also exemplified the advantages
of short military operations which did not force societies to fully mobilise the
nation in arms and which tried to avoid the combination of revolution and war.
Only in the case of the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 did mass
conscription really develop the means of modern warfare with all its disastrous
consequences.

In these wars of the late nineteenth century, particular elements of total warfare
became obvious, although total war with its new industrial character and hitherto
unknown numbers of victims did not become a collective experience in Europe
until 1914. Yet already the wars of the second half of the century, the Crimean War,
but in particular the American Civil War between 1861 and 1865 and the Wars of
German Unification between 1864 and 1871, pointed to a transformation in the
meaning of war and the changing character of modern warfare: this was essentially
caracterised by a new combination of technological progress, based upon in-
creased fire power and railway transport, and mass mobilisation in the name of an
abstract ideal of nationality and nation state. The state’s financial, economic and
military means to achieve its aims reached a peak. This new dimension of mobilisa-
tion also demanded a new ideological justification of war. War was no longer
regarded as a conflict over territory or dynastic interests, but it was fought for the
ultimate existence of nations and peoples. This necessitated the stigmatisation of
the enemy and the overcoming of the traditional separation between a state’s
armies and its people. This essential distinction between the military and the civic
sphere became questioned, as illustrated by both the actions of the North-American
General Sherman in the Southern States of the Confederation during the American
Civil War and, on a lower level of collective violence, the popular warfare of the
French against the German invaders after September 1870.

It was the intensive interaction between war and nation-building since the eighteenth century which generated the ideal notion of a nation in arms. It included at the same time the new ideal of the politically participating citizen as the natural defender of the fatherland, and hence a resurgence of the civil war paradigm against the idea of cabinet wars, separating the military sphere from that of the civil society. From that point of view, the perceived national character of conflicts after 1792 provoked civic connotations of citizenship and political expectations, and participation through conscription was the most obvious of these. If the model of a nation in arms marked the beginning of a long term process towards a radicalisation of both national self images and images of the enemy, thereby integrating many ethnic connotations focusing on belligerent myths and military memories, it was at the same time an ideal type of definition: not even the often quoted examples of Prussia in the 1860s, Germany or France after 1871 ever implemented a conscription that encompassed the complete nation. It was the experience of the First World War with hitherto unknown numbers of victims that became a fundamental challenge for the concept of a loyal nation in arms.

3. Multi-Ethnic Empires and the Military: Conscription in a Comparative Perspective

The perception of the wars since the 1850s pointed into a new direction and demonstrated in the eyes of many contemporaries that the era of mere cabinet wars fought on the basis of small armies composed of mercenaries, professional soldiers or voluntaries was over. Against the background of experiences of the 1860s and early 1870s, the war of the future, most contemporaries assumed, was to be fought with mass conscript armies, and in the name of an entire nation that had to identify with war aims in order to be fully mobilised. Thus the nation in arms and mass conscription became something of an imagined necessity in an age of dynamic international competition. This had enormous consequences for the multi-ethnic empires of Habsburg, Russia and the Ottoman Empire: not only did they witness the contemporary wars but they all shared the experience of serious military defeats in 1856, 1859, 1866 and in the 1870s. Their ability to survive a major external or internal crisis now seemed to depend on their capacity to successfully lead a future


war. Although the notion of a homogenous nation in arms was primarily an influential myth which never characterised the military practice of France or Germany before 1914, the idealised model challenged empires with their multi-ethnic population in a particular way. It radicalised the contemporary benchmark of integration and disintegration and therefore these empires’ ability to compete successfully with other states. In contrast to Britain, which kept her traditional military structure based on a small professional army of volunteers, all continental empires therefore introduced conscription laws.

Against this background, the following contributions look at the ways in which conscription influenced the different empires, and in how far they responded to the challenge of multi-ethnicity by reforming their military structures in order to make the imperial military a means of internal stabilisation and integration and a tool for external competitiveness. In order to allow at least a preliminary comparison, four themes are taken into consideration.

a) What were the prime motives behind the introduction of conscription in the four cases? In how far did the perceived model of a nation in arms influence contemporary discussions?

In the Habsburg Monarchy the motives behind the implementation of universal conscription were twofold, military and civil. Of primary importance was the military dimension. The traumatic experience of two major military defeats, 1859 against France and Piemont and 1866 against Prussia, had shocked the military and political elites and demonstrated that the empire’s security against the background of national armies in Europe could no longer be guaranteed by the army. The concrete reason for the military crises was seen in a shortage of soldiers, inadequate armament and above all in the problematic organisation of military units. The many possibilities of exemption had severely reduced the actual number of well trained soldiers. Their recruitment, mainly from the lower classes, was regarded another central reason for the army’s disastrous performance. All groups of society agreed after 1866 that only universal conscription, excluding the possibility of exemptions, could provide the imperial army with a sufficient number of capable men from all social groups. Enhancing military power and securing the monarchy’s position in a belligerent Europe were the prime reasons behind the decision in favour of conscription.

It was also seen as a civil means of integration in an empire which consisted of more than a dozen nationalities. The imperial army was to be founded on a deliberate mixture of nationalities in each military unit. Not a ‘school of the nation’ as many European contemporaries characterised the nation in arms, but as a ‘school of the people’ the imperial army should integrate different ethnic groups through common discipline and education and strengthen their loyalty towards the imperial dynasty. The military and civil motivation underline that universal conscription was
not bound to the ideological principles of a nation in arms. The Habsburg Monarchy’s ruling elites imitated the nation state’s instrument out of military necessity, but replaced its ideological content of a ‘nation in arms’ with the supranational idea of a ‘people in arms’, thus reflecting the complexities of a multi-ethnic society.

In Tsarist Russia, the first incentive to discuss universal conscription was a devastating military defeat, as in the Habsburg Monarchy. The trauma of defeat in the Crimean War of 1854/55 led to an open discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of universal conscription. Contrary to the Habsburg Monarchy, in the Russian case arguments against mass conscription were dominating for a long time: The series of Great Reforms, it was argued, needed first to be completed with the serfs’ emancipation before universal conscription could be introduced. Secondly, mass conscription would endanger the army’s social stability which was regarded fundamental for controlling and channelling possible social unrest stemming from the reforms. The third argument quoted time and again by all critics of universal conscription was the sheer quantity of human resources available in the biggest country of the world. It was hoped that this would make a system of conscription superfluous. The idea that multi-ethnicity could pose a potential threat to the conscript army’s internal structure was not considered. Potential threats were perceived to be social, not national. It was not until Prussia’s series of victories from 1864 onwards that Russia’s ruling elite began to regard conscription as a necessity for the Tsarist Empire’s future. The perception of the Prussian model and its military success led the advocates of universal conscription, above all war minister Miljutin, to convince the Tsar that military reforms were all too necessary. The fact that Prussia, as a model, was a political ally of Russia and a conservative state where mass conscription had generated enormous efficiency but not provoked social resistance, was a decisive fact. In the Russian case it was primarily military consideration and therefore the perception of a successful military role model of the West which led to the reform of the imperial military – despite the imperial elites’ objections.

In the Ottoman Empire various motives stood behind the discussion about the proposed introduction of general conscription in the early nineteenth century, especially the need for an effective army which would be capable of responding to internal and external threats and the use of the military structure for a systematic assessment of the empire’s population by statistical records. Furthermore, the recruitment of groups which had hitherto been excluded from any military service became a major argument. This referred to non-Muslim groups from the Balkans and from Anatolia as well as to Muslims from the Kurdish and Arab provinces which had enjoyed a high degree of autonomy due to their traditional tribal structures. The structural problem lying behind the introduction of general conscription became clear around the middle of the nineteenth century: the empire comprised approximately 28–29 million inhabitants, half of which were Christians, and large
parts of the Muslim population were members of tribes which had never been recruited. This left only about three to five million Muslims from which recruits could be drawn. Contemporaries feared that a further reduction of the number of Muslim subjects would finally challenge the Muslims’ status as the dominating religious community within the empire. According to this view, universal conscription was supposed to secure the Muslims’ position as the dominating religious group of the Ottoman Empire. The introduction of universal service was also considered a fundamental necessity with regard to the empire’s political situation: since it had usually been inequalities between Muslims and non-Muslims that brought about the interventions of Western powers in the internal affairs of the empire, the Ottoman government sought to eliminate these inequalities in order to stabilise its international situation. The new emphasis on legal equality between the different religious groups was thus also a concession of the Ottoman Empire with regard to the empire’s recognition as a European power.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a second and quite different motivation developed. With the focus on a new concept of an Ottoman nation, the Western European model of a homogenous nation in arms gained increasing importance. Ottomanism became the ideology of the constitutional movements of both the Young Ottomans from the mid 1860s onwards and the Young Turks after the late 1880s, culminating in the Young Turks’ revolution of 1908. The reforms of this era, including the introduction of a modern constitution, were strongly influenced by Western European models, and it was no accident that military reforms were seen as exemplary in that context. Following the idea of Ottomanism, all Ottoman subjects should form a nation of state citizens who, based on the principle of equal rights and equal duties, were to defend their Ottoman fatherland. The European concepts of conscription armies and state citizenship served as a model and underlined the importance of the transfer of models from Western nation states to the Ottoman Empire. Whereas the debates in the earlier nineteenth century had concentrated on conscription as a means of strengthening the army, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed a change in the perception of the army as a civilising institution for the Ottoman nation in arms. At least in theory, military reforms were seen as a means of the empire’s modernisation according to Western European examples.

In the case of the British Empire, conscription was only introduced in 1916, when under the radicalised experience of industrial and mass warfare the number of voluntary recruits no longer met the needs of the Western front in France. Until then, Britain had kept her traditional military structure, relying on a comparatively small army of volunteers. The comparison between the different empires thus reveals one fundamental difference between the European continent and Britain: there was no equivalent to the experience of national wars which, between 1792 and 1815 and again in the course of nation state-building in Italy and Germany from
1859 and 1871, had catalysed contemporary discussions about the importance of mobilising and arming the whole nation. Nor had the British Empire suffered military defeats similar to those of Russia, Habsburg or the Ottoman Empire since the 1850s. It was not the concept of national or people’s wars that dominated contemporary war discourses in Britain, but the small wars which accompanied the expansion of the British Empire. Throughout the long nineteenth century Britain was engaged in more or less constant military actions in her colonies. This constellation had two major consequences which distinguished the British case from the continental empires: firstly, Britain experienced these small wars as geographically distant events without any direct impact on the British Isles. Secondly, Britain relied primarily on her fleet which operated in the many imperial war theatres overseas. The self-image as a naval power and not – as in all three continental empires – as an empire founded on land forces can be identified as a major factor explaining the differences between the four cases.

Yet it was also in this context of imperial war experiences that the army’s image as a microcosm of rural Britain became challenged. Many contemporary observers related Britain’s military crisis at the beginning of the Boer War to the social degeneration of officers and soldiers and regarded it as a consequence of Britain’s successful industrialisation. Hence, the controversial debates about imperial defence, the British Empire’s role in a future war and the nation in arms model became ever more intensive after 1900. Yet in comparison, the anticipation of a major future war in Europe as a conflict about the existence of the entire nation occurred rather late in Britain. It was the naval race with Germany and the prospect of a German invasion that catalysed these anxieties. This collective perception increased both the army’s and the navy’s popularity prior to 1914. At the same time, the absence of large conscript armies on the British Isles and the geographically distant colonial small wars allowed for the development of an imagined empire nation, symbolised by the army abroad which came to represent British and Christian values. In contrast to continental countries, it was not a cult of a nation in arms that characterised this development, but rather a belated militarisation of society, as the numerous paramilitary activities of army and navy leagues, boy brigades and boy-scout movements illustrated.

b) In what ways did the empires’ multi-ethnic composition influence the practical implementation of conscription?
When planning the new conscript army, the imperial elites of Austria-Hungary had to accommodate ethnic plurality to a particular constellation. The consideration of ethnic identities which had already been included in the constitution of Cisleithania in 1867 also shaped the military laws of 1868. Having achieved a large degree of autonomy within the monarchy, Hungary was allowed to form two separate militias of its own whose members were allowed to communicate in Hungarian.
The consequence of this constellation was a permanent conflict between Vienna and Budapest over the exact number of soldiers to be drafted from the two parts of the monarchy. In addition, the empire’s multi-ethnic structure was transferred into the military organisation, the armed forces’ ethnic composition corresponded roughly to that of the whole empire. Although German remained the standard language of military instruction, a specific regiment’s language was introduced. It was chosen according to the ethnic composition of each unit. If a given language is the native language of at least 20% of the regiment’s soldiers, the officers had to learn and speak it as well. Compared with the Russian and Ottoman cases, the military reforms designed to accommodate ethnic plurality proved fairly unique. Whereas Russia tried to ignore or subdue ethnic identities in the army, in the Ottoman Empire ethnicity, combined with religion, impeded the implementation of universal conscript. The importance given to multi-ethnicity in the constitution and in civil life was transferred to the military sphere. The hierarchy of military and civil motives which had been significant for the introduction of conscription sometimes turned upside down when it came to its implementation.

In Russia it was less the Tsarist Empire’s multi-ethnic structure which influenced the implementation of conscription but rather the dominance of civil interests. While military intentions made conscription unavoidable, its implementation was determined by non-military factors. Conscription, it was argued, should not overburden civil life. Family and marital status as well as educational background enabled a variety of exemptions from military service. As a consequence of the many exemptions, including whole populations, e.g. of Siberia, the Caucasus and Finland, and with the introduction of lots and the possibilities of reducing military service, only 30% of the possible recruits of any one year were actually drafted. Contrary to the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, Russia did not take the ethnic structure and identity of her population into account when reforming her military. Yet there were two important exceptions to the general indifference towards ethnicity. Every unit of the army should consist of 75% Russians and 25% non-Russians, a rule which was strictly followed until the end of the regime. Furthermore, the high command generally tried to station recruits as far away from their home as possible in order to avoid fraternisation with the local population or even desertion. Thus Warsaw was overcrowded with Russian soldiers, while there were only a few of them in Moscow. Apart from these rules, inclusive means of accommodating multi-ethnicity did not exist, and imperial authorities would have preferred to ignore it altogether. The decision to give civil interest priority over military necessities thus impeded the import of the Western European nation in arms model to Russia. The largest country in the world was to have the weakest army among Europe’s powers.

In the Ottoman Empire, the practical implementation of conscription could never be separated from the multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure of the
empire. As the conscription laws of 1870 and 1886 showed, compulsory service was still restricted to Muslims, and the law did not even mention the recruitment of non-Muslims. When the Ottoman movement of the late nineteenth century criticised the inequality in sharing the burden of military service, thus weakening the concept of an Ottoman nation in arms, non-Muslim communities continued to object to the introduction of universal service. They turned against the government which contented itself with the exemption tax, being one of its major financial sources. The Young Ottomans also criticised the Muslims who regarded military service of non-Muslims as a potential danger for the state. Although the Young Ottomans referred to the experiences of the Great Powers – France recruiting Algerians, the British relying on Irish and Indian soldiers, Russia recruiting Tatars from the Crimea, Poles, Georgians and other ethnic groups – the implementation of general conscription provoked resistance in various parts of the empire, especially in the Balkans. The multi-religious structure provided ample opportunities for resistance: thus the Greeks demanded the formation of separate units based on religious denominations. Ever since the first attempts of military reforms, the Greek Orthodox patriarchate had insisted on such a separation between Muslim and Non-Muslim soldiers. In addition, recruitments from some Christian groups in Eastern Anatolia and Iraq partly infused competition among other Christian communities. Sultan Abdülhamids integration strategies also met with resistance of Arab tribes in the Hijjas region, including the holy sites of Mekka and Medina. The construction work on the ‘holy railway’, which was supposed to connect Damascus with Mekka, was impeded by protesting Arab tribes in the region and finally had to be abandoned. Thus the dual complexity of multi-religious and multi-ethnic structures prevented the implementation of general conscription in the Ottoman Empire.

Multi-ethnicity in the context of the early nineteenth century British army referred to the high and over-proportional numbers of Scottish and Irish soldiers fighting in the British forces. Historically, the empire’s rapid expansion during the eighteenth century had necessitated the recruitment of Irish Catholics. By the time of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, nearly 50% of the East Indian Company’s army were Irish, and 40% of the 26,000 British troops in India were Irish. An Anglo-Irish officer corps developed which played a highly disproportionate role in the British army in the nineteenth century. It accounted for approximately 17% of all officers in the British armed forces, and at least 30% of all officers serving in India. Yet, as a result of the colonial small wars not only the political role of the army changed, but also its social composition, with less officers being recruited from the landed gentry and aristocracy. The army as a whole became more urban and, in contrast to the ideal of Irish, Scottish and Welsh soldiers, more English. The British army which fought the empire’s wars, was not a multi-ethnic conscript army meant to integrate the many different ethnic groups within the empire. Multi-ethnicity in this context
referred to a notion of otherness as it had historically evolved in the different regions of the British Isles. This constellation generated the dual self-image of the Irish in particular, being «colonial» with regard to Home Rule and London, and at the same time being «imperial» by serving loyally within the empire. The expectation that the army had to play a fundamental role in keeping the empire together was derived from a different collective image, according to which the army itself was a symbol of the Union with its high proportion of Irish and Scottish soldiers and officers. Since the Union was regarded the very center of the British Empire, the army’s role for the Union could not be separated from that for the empire, as the Irish case demonstrated.

c) To what extent did conscription serve as a means of integration and stabilisation, and where are we to identify the limits of this effect? How are we to understand the relation between theory and practice of conscription in multi-ethnic empires?

In the case of the Habsburg Monarchy the question of conscription as an instrument of integration can at this point be answered mainly for the German territories of the Austrian empire. The idea of a truly universal conscription was never really implemented: Only around 20% of all those liable for service were actually drafted. Also, the number of those who did not show up for mustering was rather high in the Habsburg military, growing from 9.5% per unit in 1900 to 22% in 1910. Both factors show how militarisation from above could be limited by popular refusal from below. Both phenomena cannot be simply linked to ethnic motives; rather they were connected to religious reasons in the case of many Jews, to various personal efforts to avoid military service or to the popular contempt of military drill, as many contemporary autobiographies suggest. This evidence, preliminary as it may be, shows that ethnicity as an isolated factor cannot be made responsible for the imperial army’s rather limited potential of integration. Only in combination with other factors – religion, social and economic conditions, age or political ideology – did it have a profound impact. From that point of view, ethnicity was a concept of «situational» relevance. The original expectations which had accompanied the introduction of universal conscription in the Habsburg Monarchy were only partly fulfilled. Military power remarkably improved, as the imperial army’s long survival during the First World War demonstrated. Yet the idea of the army as an instrument of supranational integration was applied successfully only to the officer corps; in the conscript army at large it had no major effect.

The Russian army’s potential of integration was rather ambivalent. On the one hand there was a significant discrimination against Jews who were deliberately excluded from further military careers. The military organisation never appealed to Russians or non-Russians: Supplies did not work effectively, barracks had to be built by the soldiers themselves, and often they had to make their own money by activities outside the garrisons in order to survive. The military itself remained an isolated
part of Russian society. The lack of reserve or veteran associations prevented any further militarisation of society or limited the effects of even an imagined nation in arms. On the other hand, serving in the army guaranteed stability and provided a certain stimulus for the Tsarist Empire’s modernisation. Illiterate soldiers were educated, statistical and medical progress achieved by the army’s medical officers was transferred into the civil sphere, and the army’s additional function as police had a stabilizing effect on the country as a whole.

While the army thus had a certain modernising effect in peacetime, the original military expectations associated with conscription were never fulfilled. The priority of civil interest over military necessities and the trust in quantity eventually leading to the Russian victory proved to be wrong assumptions, as the military disasters against Japan in 1904/05 and the First World War demonstrated.

After several attempts, conscription was finally introduced in the Ottoman Empire in 1909. However, the introduction of general conscription was accompanied by numerous setbacks and obstacles. Before the Young Turks’ Revolution in 1908, governments were not really interested in establishing a multi-religious army, which reflected both political and financial problems. Despite the experience of the Crimean War and the focus on equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, the government continued to collect an exemption tax from Christians and Jews which had become a major financial source for the empire. The rejection of military service by non-Muslims proved to be equally problematic. Many of those liable to military service left the empire. Establishing conscription in regions where tribal structures prevailed proved to be particularly difficult, as the examples of Arab, Albanian and Kurdish provinces demonstrated. Various attempts by the Young Turks to introduce military service resulted in violent revolts in Arab and Albanian provinces. The most serious setback which the concept of an Ottoman nation in arms suffered was the experience of the Balkan War 1912/13, when the Ottoman national army was quickly defeated by the national armies of the Balkan states, and nearly all European territories of the Ottoman Empire were annexed. The disillusioning war experiences revealed the wide gap between conscription theory and practice in the Ottoman Empire.

In the British case, the question of theory and practice of conscription does not make sense for the period prior to 1916. But in an asymmetric comparison one can at least point to the Boer War which marked a watershed in the history of imperial wars and in the composition of British imperial forces, thus anticipating future developments. Thousands of volunteers from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand had joined British forces. Initially it had been decided not to include «coloured troops» from other parts of the empire in order to make it «a white man’s war». However, both the British and the Boers were forced to include soldiers recruited from the African population in the course of the conflict. That way, over 100,000 Africans served as scouts and laborers, and in the end even Lord Kitchener, the
Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, had to admit the arming of over thousands of indigenous men.

Even more significant for the complexities of imperial defence around 1900 was the link which contemporaries established between the war in South Africa and the crisis over Ireland. The Irish paradox, being both ‘colonial’ and ‘imperial’, became particularly obvious during the Boer War: two Transvaal Brigades were formed by the Irish on behalf of the Boers, but serving on the opposite site were about 28,000 Irish soldiers in the British army. If pro-Boer agitation inspired the Irish republican movement, serving the Empire against the Boers in South Africa was an important aspect of Ulster Unionism. The problems of integrating both Union and Empire were thus reflected in the British military’s composition and its transformation since the 1890s.

d) Although the First World War is thematically excluded from the period under research here, it seems important to consider what the experience of the 1914 to 1918 meant for the empires’ conscript armies?

In contrast to the negative image of the Habsburg Monarchy’s army during the First World War, the imperial army functioned fairly well after 1914, particularly if one takes into consideration the enormous military problems it was confronted with. Neither general mobilisation in July 1914 nor the permanent extension of military service to the male population met with major resistance. Differing from the Ottoman case where mass desertion of Christian soldiers seriously weakened the military structures, desertion or refusal never limited the Habsburg army’s performance. National resistance was not so much a problem of the soldiers; it was more the German high command who demonstrated permanent distrust towards the non-German nationalities of the monarchy. Apart from desertions in some Czech regiments towards the end of the war and despite the auspices of total war, multi-ethnicity did not severely challenge the imperial military basis. Militarisation from above, barely successful in peace, became effective in war by a mobilisation of all available human resources.

In the Russian Empire the everyday life of Russian soldiers after August 1914 reflected a grotesque military mismanagement by the government which was not capable to effectively mobilise the country’s human and natural resources. The government’s wartime propaganda was characterised by obsessions of espionage and treason which became more and more directed against non-Russian groups. Yet at the same time it failed to provoke patriotic sentiments and a feeling of solidarity amongst the mass of Russian soldiers. The enormous scope of exemptions from conscription in peacetime proved highly problematic in wartime: On the one hand, among those being exempted, above all non-Russian nationalities from Siberia, the Caucasus or Finland, resentment towards the imperial rule grew rapidly. On the other hand, the violation of conscription exemption in Central Asia
through the government led to civil unrest. The desertion rates of non-Russian nationalities that were subject to military service rose to extraordinary levels. As Aviel Roshwald and Eric Lohr have convincingly argued, the war reinforced the role of nationality in defining identities and caused certain ethnic groups to develop new loyalties. The fact that Russia’s conscript army had neither managed nor even tried to accommodate non-Russian groups during peacetime, contributed to the crisis of imperial legitimacy through alienation from the empire’s non-Russian regions during the war.

Following the Balkan War, the idea of Ottomanism lost much of its appeal in the Ottoman Empire, yet the Ottoman army formally remained an Ottoman national army until the outbreak of the First World War. However, during the First World War all the problems of a multi-ethnic army became obvious: numerous Muslims and non-Muslims deserted. In 1918, the overall number of deserters was four times higher than the actual number of soldiers fighting on the front. Furthermore, the desertion of non-Muslims, in particular of Armenians on the Eastern front, generated hatred among many Muslim soldiers. Thus the complete failure of military campaigns against the Russians deepened suspicion against the Armenians. These military disasters on the Eastern combined together with the high number of deserters and increasing resistance in Armenia led the government to the decision to evacuate the Armenian population of Anatolia to Iraq – with disastrous consequences. This crisis marked the end of the Ottoman concept of a military nation, although its legacy was to influence the concept of a future army in Republican Turkey.

The First World War marked a watershed for the British Empire in various ways. The experience of mass war forced the government to introduce general conscription in 1916. This led to a particular problem with regard to the interrelation between imperial and colonial identity in the Irish case: Irishmen made up only about 10% of the British army recruits in 1913, compared with still 20% in 1870, and from 1914 onwards the figures were down to only 6%. In the Dominions however, enlistment during the First World War varied between 13 and 19% of the overall white population. Recruitments from Ireland declined especially after the Easter Rising in 1916. It was the First World War which initiated a new role for the colonies and dominions and a fundamentally new relationship between Britain and the empire. Radicalising the earlier experience of the Boer War, the empire now came close to a single military entity with joint military operations in various war theaters. Pan-British sentiments dominated in the white Dominions, and the outbreak of war was often used to defend the very different positions held in the hierarchy of the empire. Contrary to the expectations of both the government and the military high command, the realities of war demonstrated the growing importance of imperial troops for the military theaters around the world. As the case of India demonstrated, making her the «barrack in the Eastern seas» also meant to
change her weight within the empire, and the result was a new equation between war contributions and political status based on a new structure of political representation.

The preliminary results of this comparative analysis underline that there was no simplistic process of cause and effect between the nation in arms model, the implementation of universal conscription and the move towards integrating multi-ethnic societies. Contemporary responses to the influential and suggestive myth of a homogeneous nation in arms, motivations for conscription and practical consequences varied in the four cases presented here. What all empires had in common was the traumatic experience of lost wars or military crises. Whereas military and civil motivations could be found in all continental empires, the application of conscription to a multi-ethnic imperial society took different paths and led to specific consequences: in the Habsburg Monarchy and in the Ottoman Empire, multi-ethnicity played a major role for implementing conscription. It was hoped that by a conscript army ethnic differences could be bridged. In Tsarist Russia, in contrast, multi-ethnicity as a fundamental category did not feature prominently among the elites who remained sceptical towards the potential effects of conscription on the society as a whole. Whereas the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire since the Ottoman movement imported the model of the nation in arms and applied it to the different contexts of their empires, the prime focus in Russia was the military success of the Prussian model, and not the nation in arms. In the British case, the perception of the continental model remained theoretical and discursive, but the Boer War and the dual complexity of securing the Union and defending the Empire catalysed controversial debates after 1900. The reality of the imperial military underlined the paradoxical constellation of being «imperial» and «colonial» as the Irish proved in the British case, like the Hungarians in the Habsburg Monarchy.

The First World War put the different paths to the test of mass loyalty and military efficiency: whereas the Habsburg multi-ethnic conscript army did not disintegrate, both the Ottoman national army and the Russian army suffered serious defeats thus contributing to a rapid crisis of imperial legitimacy. Whether this can be attributed to both the latter empires’ lack of combining military duties with political rights remains an object of further research. The British experienced what had already been anticipated by the Boer War: the reality of a global war in which the Union became increasingly dependent on the empire’s war contributions. These results suggest that ethnicity was not per se a disintegrating factor in the everyday life of the soldiers, as the examples of the British Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy indicate. Only in certain contexts and constellations which involved religion in the Ottoman Empire and to some extent in Russia as well, it could have a strongly disintegrative effect. Although these results are still preliminary, they help us to look critically behind long held assumptions: We can no longer
reduce the causes for the Habsburg Monarchy’s disintegration mainly to ethnic conflicts and those for the Tsarist Empire’s breakdown primarily to social reasons.

In sum, it seems highly significant that the contemporary discussions, perceptions and problems in actually implementing conscription revealed many of the structural peculiarities of the four empires. Conscription was certainly part of the empires’ attempts to survive the test of a future war by turning into ‘nationalising empires’. This has to be seen against the background of a dynamic international competition between belligerent states since the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet, France and Germany as examples of ‘imperialising nations in arms’ based on belligerent qualities also met enormous difficulties when preparing for the major war of the future. The fundamental question about the consequences of arming the people – the new link between military service and political participation, thus transforming the political and constitutional system; the ideological militarisation of society, provoking new expectations of what the gains from a future war would be; the potentially revolutionary effects of a people’s war, opening Pandora’s box of civil war – all these warn us not to over-idealise the integrative effects of transnational models for multi-ethnic empires, and not to oversee the complex reality behind the myth of a nation in arms.

Abstracts

**Does the Empire strike back? Das Modell der Nation in Waffen als Herausforderung multiethnischer Großreiche im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert**

im Britischen Empire. Der Vergleich zeigt, dass das Integrationspotential der Wehrpflicht in multiethnischen Gesellschaften begrenzt war. Die Probleme bei der Umsetzung des Konzeptes der Nation in Waffen ließen vielmehr die jeweils besonderen strukturellen Konstellationen, Krisen und Legitimationsdefizite der Empires in einem Zeitalter wachsender internationaler Konkurrenz klarer hervortreten. Hierin berührten sich die Erfahrungen der «nationalisierenden Empires» mit jenen der «imperialisierenden Nationalstaaten».

Does the Empire strike back? Le modèle d’une nation armée comme défi pour les empires multiethniques au 19e et 20e siècles

A la vue d’une véritable inflation de la notion «Empire» dans les débats actuels, l’article vise d’abord à établir une définition utile des notions «empire» et «multiethnité» en tant que fondement d’une comparaison internationale des empires multiethniques à partir du 19e siècle. La comparaison concrète, à laquelle ce volume est consacré, focalise sur une étude exemplaire du concept de la nation armée, modèle développé en France et en Prusse, et la conception d’une armée fondée sur le service militaire générale, qui en résultait. La deuxième partie analyse les origines et les caractéristiques de ce modèle et les limites du mythe de la nation armée. La comparaison explicite effectuée dans la troisième partie de cet article examine le défi particulier pour les grands empires multiethniques à partir des années 1860, défi posé par l’adoption du concept ou le débat sur lui. Cette perspective comparatiste se fonde dans les perceptions différentes des guerres européennes à partir des années 1850, dans les motivations de l’adoption du service militaire générale et finalement dans la théorie et la pratique de ce modèle dans la Monarchie des Habsbourg, dans l’Empire russe, dans l’Empire ottoman et finalement dans l’Empire britannique. La comparaison démontre que l’effet d’intégration de la conscription obligatoire resta limité dans les sociétés multiethniques. Au contraire, les problèmes avec la réalisation de la nation armée rendaient plus claires les constellations structurelles, les crises et les déficits de légitimation des empires dans un âge d’une rivalité internationale croissante. En ce point, les expériences des «empires nationalisants» ressemblaient à celles des «états nations impérialisantes».

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