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Imperial Experts and Their Autobiographical Practices. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires in Comparison (late 19th-early 20th centuries). Research project "Imperial Subjects. Autobiographical practices and historical change in the continental empires of the Romanovs, Habsburgs and Ottomans (Middle of the 19th —early 20th century)", 21.07.2014—22.07.2014.

Reviewed by Henning Lautenschläger

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Imperial Experts and Their Autobiographical Practices. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires in Comparison (late 19th-early 20th centuries)

The second conference as part of the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and SNF (Schweizerischer Nationalfonds) sponsored research project âImperial Subjects. Autobiographical practices and historical change in the continental empires of the Romanovs, Habsburgs and Ottomans (Middle of the 19th â early 20th century)â took place July 21-22, 2014, in Munich. For more information on the project visit (18.9.2014). There, scholars dealt with autobiographical cultures of experts in the three East European empires.

After a warm welcome, BENJAMIN SCHENK (Basel) and MARTIN AUST (Munich) opened the event by establishing a conceptual framework and introducing the questions central to the conference and the research project. Schenk presented the key concepts: First of all, the term âimperial subjectâ with its ambiguous meaning refers to both the subordinate character of the people living in empires as well as the quality of a âsubjectâ as an individual. Secondly, the phrase âautobiographical practiceâ, according to Jochen Hellbeck, is meant to widen the term âautobiographyâ to all forms of self-testimonies and to allude to the practices by which they were produced, published, collected and received. This definition supports the understanding of self-referenced writing as an act of social communication. Jochen Hellbeck, Autobiographical Practices in Russia, GÃ¶ttingen 2004. These two concepts are connected with the accelerated historical change in the context of modernisation and globalisation in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. From then on, an autobiographical boom took place in all three of the East European empires and, as the research project suggests, was deeply connected with the perception and discussion of this change in imperial contexts.

Martin Aust defined the term âimperial expertâ and posed a few guiding questions for the conference. In his view, experts in the wider sense can be defined from two perspectives: First, from the top down. The imperial government hired someone as an expert because they had specific skills to perform a certain task. The second perspective is more bottom-up: There were of course many self-proclaimed experts who thought their expertise would be very useful or important for the state and who identified themselves strongly with the empire.

Following these introductory thoughts, the conference tried to answer specific questions: How did those experts in their autobiographical practices relate their skills to larger designs of empire and how did they create or adopt their own visions of empire? Did the dynasties and imperial representatives meet the expertsâ high expectations? Did autobiographical writings of experts create specific professional spaces of communication or were they part of bigger discourses?

The first panel was devoted to Jewish autobiography. MARINA MOGILNER (Chicago) analysed the examination of the Jewish writer and Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940) with the discourse of race. He denied any âSemiticâ origin of the Jewish people and determined it a âEuropean raceâ. He also underlined the importance of the âpure bloodedâ reproduction community of the contemporary Jewry and romanticised the preserved âunspoiledâ way of life of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement. Accordingly, in his autobiographical novel âThe Fiveâ he tried to demonstrate the âtragic illusiveness of the assimilationist choiceâ. By incorporating topics from his personal and public life and describing what were, in his opinion, the negative effects of the imperial era on the Jewish population â assimilation, hybridity, and the absence of Jewish subjectivity â he simultaneously envisioned a postcolonial future of a heroic and integral Jewish nation.

JÃRG SCHULTE (Cologne) examined the autobiographical writings of the Jewish writer Saul Tchernichovsky (1875â1943). His autobiography differed from the common Russian Jewish autobiography that was written as a *Bildungsroman* in that his was more similar to classical renaissance biographies. It only covered the years of his childhood in the Russian province of Tauria and was probably written for Jewish children. By translating his Russian childhood into Hebrew and creating a lot of words from old Hebrew and Aramaic, he produced the image of a âmythical childhoodâ, Schulte argued.

The second and biggest panel at the conference dealt with autobiographical practices in the Ottoman Empire. In contrast to high state officials, less is known about the lower ranks of officials and experts in the Ottoman world. FELIX KONRAD (Kiel) provided detailed insight into the worldview and thinking of Muhammad al-Baqli, an Egyptian engineer in the rank of an *efendi*. In 1865 he published a short tribute to the ruling family together with a description of Egyptâs history, his education, and his service for the state. Despite the variety of contents, Konrad cogently analysed the text as a cohesive unit: He interpreted it as self-testimony and as an innovative appeal by al-Baqli for promotion. As Konrad pointed out, al-Baqli reflects views representative of the emerging group of young, highly qualified and state-educated Egyptian and Ottoman experts in the second half of the 19th century: Demanding a proper social status and payment according to their accomplishments, their modern views of meritocracy were frustrated by the contemporary dependencies on personal networks.

EYAL GINIO (Jerusalem) gave a talk on the writings of Ottoman officers taken as prisoners of war. These officers held captive during the Balkan wars in Serbia and Bulgaria produced a huge amount of autobiographical writings and thereby strongly shaped the Ottoman memory of these wars. For most of these men the military defeats and the loss of the greater part of the Balkan Peninsula were caused due to a lack of a national ideal and education in their own state. In their views, Bulgarians and Serbs had rapidly risen from backward shepherds to form modern (nation-)states thanks to huge efforts in the education sector and state modernisation. Being able to get an inside view into the enemyâs society while held captive, they considered it a role model for modernizing the Ottoman Empire.

BARBARA HENNING (Bamberg) surveyed the autobiographical fragments of a minor official in the Ottoman provincial administration in Syria. Born into a Kurdish family of notables and educated in state schools, Mehmed Salih Bedirhan (1873/74-1915) negotiated in his texts different frames of self-identification: His vision of imperial success was deeply connected to ideals of individualism and meritocracy. But as his writings reveal, the state as well as his family restricted his possibilities by considering him as part of a collective identity, his family: First, he was pressured by his family into a marriage with a relative and to take a post in the provincial administration. Then, he was subjected to collective punishment by the Ottoman state due to the involvement of two distant family members in the assassination of a state official. This compelled him to consider his ideal version of a career in the Empire and how it had failed against the reality of imperial collective identities. Here, empire for him not only meant a space of possibilities, but also one of frustration and limitations.

RICHARD WITTMANN (Istanbul) had a look at one individualâs perception of modernisation in late Ottoman society in examining the memoirs of AÅÃ§i Dede Ibrahim (1828-ca. 1910). He did this on the basis of how the Islamic mystic and accountancy officer assessed the introduction of different objects such as photography or European clothing into Ottoman material culture in his memoirs. In this manner Wittmann pointed out that Ibrahim had two different frames of reference â âthat of the pious Sufi [...] and that of the imperial bureaucrat of the modern, Western and secularized Ottoman armyâ. With different judgements on modern objects Ibrahim positioned himself as an autonomous individual and solved the contradictions between his conflicting points of reference.

Autobiographies from the Habsburg Empire were presented in the third section of the conference. MARION WULLSCHLEGER (ZÃ¼rich) examined the historical traces of two Habsburg officials in the Austrian Littoral and their autobiographical practices after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Alfred Freiherr von Fries-Skene (1870-1947) and Alois Lasciac (1858-1939) were both imperial experts in administrative law and in governing the littoral provinces. In his autobiographical texts written in fascist Italy Lasciac aimed mainly to present himself as an expert of local lore and to defend his honour. Fries-Skeneâs manuscripts created in 1919 and 1941 seem to be intended for publication. He saw the Littoral as a mirror of the Empire, that is, as a heterogeneous entity of peoples cultivated by German *mission civilisatrice*.

CHRISTIAN MARCHETTI (TÃ¼bingen) offered three different functions of autobiographical practices by presenting the autobiographies of the late Habsburg ethnographers Carl Freiherr von Czoernig (1804-1889), Raimund Friedrich Kaindl (1866-1930), and Baron Franz Nopcsa (1877-1933). Czoernig described himself as model ethnographer in service to the Empire who can be called a true âimperial subjectâ. Published in 1925 from a post-imperial perspective, Kaindl reflected on his work in the context of rising interwar German nationalism: Strongly supporting the establishment of a *vÃ¶lkische Deutschtumskunde* he stressed the positive influence of the German population in the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Nopcsa, however, an aristocratic geologist, albanologist and adventurer, saw his ethnographic work in terms of gaining a unique transcultural experience and expertise which was not adequately valued by his contemporaries.

The last section about the Russian Empire was opened with the lecture by PETER HOLQUIST (Philadelphia) on the bureaucratic diaries of Fedor Martens (1845-1909), Dmitrii Miliutin (1816-1912), and Petr Valuev (1815-1890). He suggested that apart from the common contemporary tradition of romanticist and self-reflective autobiographical texts such as Alexander Herzenâs there was a second type of autobiographical writing: The bureaucratic diary, lacking subjective elements, was generally dedicated to the menâs life of service and intended for family depositing or archival storage. By the semi-public nature of these texts the professional careers of the writers were to be polished and kept for future generations.

The memoirs of the tsarist and Soviet geographer Veniamin Semenov-Tian Shanskii (1870- 1942) were written during the siege of Leningrad in 1941. GUIDO HAUSMANN (Munich) pointed out that Tian Shanskii described the former Russian Empire in terms of a place of opportunities and strongly related to his family and the life of other companions from the former imperial elite. He presented his career as one of service for the motherland, no matter whether it took place in the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Although he came to terms with the new order, he considered it dangerous for the development of the individual. Hausmann also convincingly demonstrated that Tian Shanskiiâs memoirs needed to be understood as a continuation of a specific practice of writing family history.

The final discussion mainly focussed on the comparability of the mentioned Empires and the imperial dimension of historical change. MAURUS REINKOWSKI (Basel) underlined the responsibility to compare but also cautioned not to over-homogenise and over-generalise possible similarities. He pleaded to stand the huge variety between the Empires and not to regard it as a disappointment but as a chance for extensive research. Although all three Empires developed similarly in the early modern period and faced comparable challenges at the end of the 19th century, they arguably tried to solve them in different ways.

Marina Mogilner saw comparable topics in the cultures of bureaucracy and modernisation. She stressed the need to look for the imperial specifics posed by the challenges of modernisation. For her, one important characteristic was that in the face of the long crisis of imperial self-identification empires had to consolidate and conceptualise their identity based on their variety. For a long time before the onset of modernisation, subjects of the East European empires were not forced to identify themselves with the state. She also urged the audience to pay special attention to the language in which the empire tried to do that.

Altogether the conference stimulated lively and critical discussions and expanded current knowledge on bureaucratic, scientific and cultural experts in all three empires. It also increased the awareness for a closer look at the international and global contexts of expert cultures in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Last but not least, the discussion about the comparability of autobiographical writings in the Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov Empires surely will give fruitful impulses for further research on autobiographical practices in this field of study.

Conference Overview:

Martin Aust (Munich) / Benjamin Schenk (Basel), Welcome and Introduction

Panel 1: Jewish Autobiography
Martin Aust (Munich), chair

Marina Mogilner (Chicago), Defining the Racial Self: Autobiographical Contexts of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Engagement with the Discourse of Race

JÃ¶rg Schulte (Cologne), Hebrew Childhood in Late Imperial Russia: The Autobiography of Saul Tchernichowsky (1875â1943)

Alexis Hofmeister (Basel), commentator

Panel 2: The Ottoman Empire
Murat Kaya (Basel), chair

Felix Konrad (Kiel), Visions of Professionalism, Progress and Social Advancement: the Autobiographical Writing of Muhammad al-Baqli (born 1838/39)

Eyal Ginio (Jerusalem), Reflecting on their own Experiences, Reflecting on the Empire: Ottoman Officers' Writing on the Balkan War

Barbara Henning (Bamberg), A 'passionate Ottoman' in late 19th-century Damascus: Mehmed Salih Bedirhan's Autobiographical Writing in the Context of the Ottoman-Kurdish Bedirhani Family.

Richard Wittmann (Istanbul), Torn between God and His "Shadow on Earth": Self-Positioning in the Life Narrative of a 19th century Ottoman Civil Servant

Maurus Reinkowski (Basel), commentator

Panel 3: The Habsburg Empire
Nora Mengel (Munich), chair

Marion Wullschleger (Zurich), âTruthfulness and Sincerityâ. Habsburg Civil Servants in Trieste and their Autobiographical Practices after the Fall of the Empire.

Christian Marchetti (TÃ¼bingen), The Ethnographic âIâ â Autobiographical Writing of Ethnographers in the Late Habsburg Empire

Robert Luft (Munich), commentator

Panel 4: The Russian Empire
Carla Cordin (Basel), chair

Peter Holquist (Philadelphia), Bureaucratic Diaries: Fedor F. Martens, Dmitrii A. Miliutin and Petr A. Valuev

Guido Hausmann (Munich), A Testimonial of Scholarly Work in Late Imperial Russia: the Memoirs of the Geographer Veniamin P. Tian-Shanskii (1870-1942)

Benjamin Schenk (Basel), commentator

Final discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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