Contemporary European History (2025), **34**, 1201–1211
doi:10.1017/S0960777325100957

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION

Navigating Post-Imperial Transitions after the First World War: Introduction

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> Everyone had an idea as to how to save Germany. However, none of these proposals had anything to do with Germany. Rather, they were tied to personal interests. An old woman who had lost her fortune through money-mongering was angry with the officers, who were angry with the striking workers. She blamed the soldiers for Germany's defeat, while the colonial tradesman for no apparent reason was forever blasting the emperor's declaration of war. Even the housekeeper started discussing politics with me when she came to tidy up my room . . .
>
> – Sabahattin Ali, *Madonna in a Fur Coat*[1]

In Sabahattin Ali's *Madonna in a Fur Coat* (1943), a young man named Raif, the wayward son of a Turkish merchant, arrives in 1920s Berlin to discover a society in convulsion. The conversations he alludes to in the opening quotation reflect the anger felt by individuals from a range of backgrounds at the dissolution of the *Kaiserreich* in the wake of the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles. It is a situation to which the character himself can relate: the original purpose of his trip to Berlin had been to revive his father's soapmaking industry, which had thrived under the aegis of a now similarly defunct Ottoman Empire. Raif and his interlocutors were among the many millions of former subjects of the Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires navigating their way through the wreckage of these collapsed powers and finding their place in the new states that emerged to replace them.

As it happens, Raif shows little interest in working to rebuild his father's business networks; he spends much of his time reading, conversing and discovering the city. But many individuals in a similar situation after the First World War were far more enterprising, seeking to maintain or reestablish connections that had been lost in the dissolution of empire. Their success varied. The post-imperial moment was complex, and it was not always apparent how best to deal with the unravelling threads of the empires they had formerly called home. As the *flaneur* Raif observes, however, for better or worse, 'personal interests' coloured individuals' experience of the dramatic geopolitical transformations that took place in the wake of the First World War. It is to these individual interests held by European and Middle Eastern citizens and subjects that the articles in this special issue turn their attention.

[1]Sabahattin Ali, *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, trans. Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 47–8.

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Over the past decade, a flurry of revisionist work has called into question the narratives that had long framed analyses of the post–First World War settlement in Europe and beyond.[2] No longer are the Paris Peace Treaties presented as a straightforward vehicle for the application of Wilson's Fourteen Points and the principle of national self-determination in the territories of the defeated European empires.[3] Gone, too, is the vision of the League of Nations as a well-meaning but ultimately utopian organisation for the regulation of international relations, doomed to fall prey to the ambitions of national-turned-nationalist states.[4] Instead, scholars have highlighted the complexities of a post-war world marked by continued violence – particularly in Eastern and Southeastern Europe – and protracted negotiation between the actors at the international, national and local levels who were involved in drawing the boundaries of a new global order.[5] This recent literature has served to spotlight the remarkable, if often tragic, creativity of the post-War years and the dynamism of the inter-war world.[6]

But the empires that crumbled to make way for this new world – the Romanov, Hohenzollern, Habsburg and Ottoman domains – died hard. As the violence subsided, the new states that emerged during this period, from Czechoslovakia to Poland, Romania, Hungary, Turkey, Syria and beyond, had to contend with a profound imperial legacy. In practical terms, the construction of these states necessitated legal and administrative reforms, de- and re-mobilisations, dismissals and recruitments, expropriations and redistributions, to recast imperial structures in a new, national mould. The commercial networks that had been built around and between these empires, meanwhile, were either abandoned, revived or reshaped by the individuals and companies that had previously depended upon them. Finally, the memory of that imperial past was itself difficult to efface and capable of resurfacing at numerous moments, down to the present day – as illustrated by the 'neo-Ottomanist' discourse in contemporary Turkish politics or, tragically, in Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine.[7]

[2]For an overview of the recent literature, see Robert Gerwarth, 'The Sky Beyond Versailles: The Paris Peace Treaties in Recent Historiography', *Journal of Modern History* 93, no. 4 (2021): 896–930.

[3]Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001); Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

[4]Susan Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations', *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2007): 1091–117. More recently, Joseph Maiolo and Laura Robson have challenged interpretations of the purpose of the League. See *The League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[5]The literature is vast, but for recent work on the continuum of violence, see: Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (New York: Allen Lane, 2016); Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War, 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). On creating states at the local level, see: Zachary Mazur, 'Mini-States and Micro-Sovereignty: Local Democracies in East Central Europe, 1918–1923', *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 4 (2024): 1208–21. On the transformation of empires in the new global order, see: Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, 'Empires after 1919: Old, New, Transformed', *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019): 81–100; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jonathan Wyrtzen, *Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). For an interesting case of states' positioning in the international order, see Samuel J. Hirst, *Against the Liberal Order: Turkey, the Soviet Union, and Statist Internationalism, 1919–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[6]Andrew Denning and Heidi Tworek, eds., *The Interwar World* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

[7]On the recent case of Russian imperial memory, see Christoph Mick, 'The Fight for the Past: Contested Heritage and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14, no. 2 (2023): 135–53. Other examples of the memory of imperial/colonial pasts resurfacing include: Willeke Sandler, *Empire in the Heimat: Colonialism and Public Culture in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz and Lora Wildenthal, eds., *Germany's Colonial Pasts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Christoph Mick, '"What Did They Die For?" War Remembrance in Austria in the Transition from Empire to Nation State', in *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 261–83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For historians of the Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, a space has therefore opened up to reconsider how abrupt the transition to their successor states truly was. Challenging the national narratives constructed to emphasise the historical rootedness of the new post-war states, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the imperial inheritance that they carried with them.[8] This shift itself derives from more recent political and scholarly developments in the regions concerned. The question of continuity between Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, for instance, has been a key topic of inquiry since the early 2000s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain appeared to spark the return of long-standing tensions between Russia and its constituent and neighbouring nationalities.[9] Elsewhere, the centenary of the First World War and, more recently, the Treaty of Lausanne have brought a refreshing reappraisal of the Ottoman Empire's deep entanglement in European affairs before, during and after the First World War.[10] The issue of continuity in German history has a long pedigree, of course, but it has been revived in recent years through public engagement with the country's colonial past and the contentious question of the path that led across the First World War caesura, from 'Windhoek to Auschwitz'.[11] The field of Habsburg studies has likewise been revitalised by historians' rediscovery of the Dual Monarchy's dynamism, its participation in overseas imperial ventures and its deep-rooted legacies in East-Central Europe.[12]

These developments have shed light on the surprising afterlives of the defeated empires in the decades after the First World War, though the focus has varied depending on the context. In the historiography of Russia, the approaches of 'New Imperial History' have revealed the long shadow of the 'nationalities question', which emerged as a concern for Tsarist governments but continued to haunt their Soviet successors. One strand of this research has underlined the utility of pre-revolutionary visions of a federal empire to policymakers after 1917, for whom it offered a means of incorporating distinct nationalities into a Russian-dominated state, particularly in the borderlands.[13] Historians of Germany too have taken an interest in the protracted embrace of empire in politics, planning and the popular imagination after the formal loss of the country's overseas possessions.[14] Many Germans did

[8]Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn, 2019).

[9]The topic has been frequently examined in the journals founded during these years – *Kritika* and *Ab Imperio*, in particular. For an early reflection on this turn, see Ronald Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[10]See, for instance: Ryan Gingeras, *The Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Yiğit Akın, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the Treaty of Lausanne, see: Michelle Tusan, *The Last Treaty: Lausanne and the End of the First World War in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Jonathan Conlin and Ozan Ozavci, eds., *They All Made Peace – What Is Peace? The 1923 Lausanne Treaty and the New Imperial Order* (London: Gingko, 2023). On the earlier history of Ottoman entanglement in European and international affairs, see Ozan Ozavci, *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798–1864* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[11]Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Berlin: Lit, 2011); Wolfe W. Schmokel, *Dream of Empire: German Colonialism, 1919–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964).

[12]Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016); Alison Frank Johnson, 'Continental and Maritime Empires in an Age of Global Commerce', *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 4 (2011): 779–84; Walter Sauer, ed., *k.u.k kolonial: Habsburgermonarchie und europäische Herrschaft in Afrika* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2002).

[13]Cf. Ivan Sablin, *The Rise and Fall of Russia's Far Eastern Republic, 1905–1922: Nationalisms, Regionalisms, and Imperialisms in and after the Russian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2018); Alexander Semyonov, 'The Ambiguity of Federalism as a Post-Imperial Political Vision: Editorial Introduction', *Ab Imperio* 19, no. 3 (2018): 23–30.

[14]For an introduction to the literature, see Andreas Eckert, 'The First Postcolonial Nation in Europe? The End of the German Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 102–22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not give up on the dream of empire during the Weimar Republic and Third Reich, leading historians to explore most recently how postcolonial 'fantasies' were turned into 'neocolonial realities'.[15]

Habsburg Central Europe has revealed itself to be particularly fertile ground for studies of imperial legacies after the First World War, with historians in this field preferring to zoom in on the process of transition. Building on historians' efforts to challenge the image of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a mere 'prison of nations', new research has shown that there was more to the empire's destruction than the sudden 'emancipation' of those nations as states.[16] This has been the theme of Gábor Egry's major ERC-funded project, 'Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions' (NEPOSTRANS), whose members have produced pathbreaking research on local experiences of the end of empire from Bohemia/Czechoslovakia to Hungary and Romania.[17] Among other things, their work has shown the diversity of visions that contemporaries held for the future of their states. An equally outstanding example of the benefits a more careful examination of the twilight years between empire and nation-state can yield is Dominique Reill's recent work on Fiume. Eschewing the standard account of the city as the target of Italian irredentists' claims ('Fiume o morte!'), Reill demonstrates that its inhabitants' priority was in fact the pursuit of prosperity, which often led them to recover and refashion aspects of the Habsburg Empire's legal, administrative or financial arrangements to suit their needs.[18]

In the fields of legal and intellectual history, scholars have also begun to highlight the much broader impact that the dissolution of empire had upon the very concept of statehood, and its long-lasting implications for international law. Quinn Slobodian has traced neoliberal thought back to the ruins of the Habsburg world, where a group of thinkers and lawyers, shaped by their experience of pre-war tensions, began to imagine a 'carefully structured and regulated settlement' between politics and economics at an international level – ordoglobalism.[19] Natasha Wheatley, meanwhile, has shown that the creation of new states out of the rubble of the Habsburg Empire necessitated the disentanglement of deeply embedded constitutional arrangements between its constituent regions, kingdoms and crownlands. In defending the notion that autonomy for Hungary or Czechoslovakia was merely to awaken dormant but already-existing states, Wheatley argues, nationalist politicians and legal scholars stimulated new ideas concerning the formation and dissolution of states.[20] From a different perspective, Börries Kuzmany has shown how the concept of 'non-territorial autonomy', originally seen as a way of managing the Habsburg Empire's ethnic diversity, shaped discussions on the introduction of minority

[15]Birthe Kundrus, 'Nach Versailles: Postkoloniale Phantasien und neokoloniale Realitäten', in *Weimar und die Welt: Globale Verflechtungen der ersten deutschen Republik*, ed. Christoph Cornelißen and Dirk van Laak (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 89–106. This dovetails, of course, with the pioneering work by Sean Wempe on the former agents of German colonial expansion who found new homes in the League of Nations. See Sean A. Wempe, *Revenants of the German Empire: Colonial Germans, Imperialism, and the League of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[16]Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*. On the challenge to the 'prison of nations' narrative, see Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119; Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). See also the special issue 'How East Central Europe Changed: The István Deák School of History', *Journal of Austrian-American History* 7, no. 1 (2023).

[17]Gabor Egry et al., *Momentous Times and Ordinary People: Life on the Ruins of Austria-Hungary* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2023).

[18]Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2020).

[19]Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 12.

[20]Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rights protection by the League of Nations.[21] Indeed, the League itself is increasingly seen as seminal for imperial liquidation at this juncture.[22]

This work dovetails with that of historians of the Ottoman Empire, who have also identified in the post-war settlement the traces of pre-war imperial and international arrangements. On the one hand, Laura Robson has argued that the 'minorities treaties' imposed upon the successor states of the Ottoman Empire reflected the earlier 'capitulations' that granted external powers the right to intervene on behalf of non-Muslim subjects of the Sultan.[23] On the other hand, as Aimee Genell shows, the Ankara government's efforts to free the country from foreign intervention and oversight rested on the argument that the Ottoman Empire, to which the emerging Turkish Republic was an heir, had itself invented the very notion of 'minority rights' by offering protection to its non-Muslim subjects.[24] Bringing together the work of these historians working in different contexts hints at the much broader, 'pan-imperial' legacy upon which the post-war settlement was built.

Clear continuities across the caesura of the First World War in Central, Southern and Eastern Europe and the Middle East have thus begun to emerge.[25] What is striking about much of this recent research, whether it focuses on transition or longer temporal frameworks, is its increasing focus on individuals. The study of regime change through the lens of people, historians are showing, brings a welcome emphasis on the role of personal interests, experiences and practicalities in state-building, helping to make sense of outcomes that cannot be explained by national narratives. A number of recent studies have shown how prominent individuals in politics carried their own experience of the imperial past into the post-imperial future of their new post-war states. Michael Provence has described how the 'last Ottoman generation' came to play a key role in the shaping of the modern Middle East, drawing on their experience and visions of empire to alternately resist or integrate the mandates imposed by the League of Nations.[26] Recent biographies of central political figures such as Josef Pilsudski, Mustafa Kemal and Carl Gustaf Mannerheim likewise show how empires shaped even those leaders most closely associated with post-war nationalism in Poland, Turkey and Finland, respectively.[27] In a similar vein, Iryna Vushko's wonderful new work describes the way in which the memory of the Habsburg Empire shaped some of its former subjects' visions of politics, from democratic socialism to conservatism.[28]

This research chimes with the much more extensive work that employs the lens of individuals during later twentieth-century imperial collapses, after 1945 and 1989. For the post–Second World

[21] Börries Kuzmany, 'Non-Territorial National Autonomy in Interwar European Minority Protection and Its Habsburg Legacies', in *Remaking Central Europe*, ed. Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 315–42.

[22] Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Remaking Central Europe: The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[23] Laura Robson, 'Capitulations Redux: The Imperial Genealogy of the Post–World War I "Minority" Regimes', *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 3 (2021): 978–1000.

[24] Aimee Genell, 'From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic: International Law and Minority Rights before and after Lausanne', in *They All Made Peace – What Is Peace? The 1923 Lausanne Treaty and the New Imperial Order*, ed. Jonathan Conlin and Ozan Ozavci (London: Gingko, 2023), 29–52.

[25] And with it there has been a sophisticated problematisation of earlier narratives that began or ended with the transition from empire to nation-state. For a brief overview of the problems with this narrative, see Jörn Leonhard, 'The End of Empires and the Triumph of the Nation-State?', in *Decades of Reconstruction: Postwar Societies, State-Building, and International Relations from the Seven Years' War to the Cold War*, ed. Ute Planert and James Retallack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); see also Joseph Esherick et al., eds., *Empire to Nation: Historical Perspectives on the Making of the Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

[26] Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[27] Joshua Zimmermann, *Jozef Pilsudski: Founding Father of Modern Poland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Henrik Meinander, *Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2023); M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[28] Iryna Vushko, *Lost Fatherland: Europeans between Empire & Nation-States, 1867–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

War era, historians have long explored the experiences and movement of 'postcolonial people' to reveal the effects of decolonisation on the reshaping of former colonies and European society.[29] Meanwhile, a similar emphasis is coming to the fore in the most recent work on the post-1989 period. Efforts to re-examine the purported success of German reunification in light of the rise of right-wing populism in the East of the country have highlighted the importance of understanding local experiences of major geopolitical transformations.[30] The work of Andrew Demshuk, to cite one outstanding example, has emphasised the agency of individuals who were neither totally at the mercy of the crumbling SED regime before 1989, nor simply left prey to West German dictates after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and instead drew on their collective resources to improve their surroundings, their employment opportunities and their future.[31]

This special issue aims to dig deeper into the experiences of people who rebuilt their lives in the wake of empire, as a new international order was being created above their heads. In particular, many of the articles consider how these individuals' 'personal interests', as the fictional character Raif put it, led them to seek opportunities to take control of their own future in the reassembling of defunct imperial structures. The authors present some of the latest research into the lived experience of former subjects of the empires that collapsed in the First World War, as they sought to navigate their way through a post-imperial landscape, from Poland to Cyprus, from Romania to Tanganyika. Unlike previous studies, which have tended to single out a particular group – usually ethnic or religious – or region for investigation, this collection highlights the sheer variety of ways in which the remnants of empire were reconfigured across Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, and the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. These individuals were not politicians; their background varied considerably – they range from diplomats to lawyers, high- and low-level civil servants, settlers, business elites and bankers. But they had in common a desire to survive and, where possible, thrive in the new legal, administrative and economic world being built around them. As Gábor Egry emphasises in the concluding article to the issue, these individuals did not simply carry the weight of empire on their shoulders as they navigated their way into a 'national' future – often, their efforts to rebuild their lives based on their past experience, consciously or not, relied on the reactivation of imperial mechanisms.

Juxtaposing the experiences of individuals from a range of socio-economic strata across a variety of regions supports the second major aim of this special issue: to suggest that the collapse of empire was itself a fundamental, defining characteristic of the post-war era across Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, as transformational as the emergence of national states and mandates themselves. Historians have, for example, productively engaged with borderlands such as Galicia or Silesia as geographical zones where the new post-1919 states naturally struggled to introduce clear-cut categories of national belonging, but as the articles here suggest, the imposition of new legal, administrative or economic structures on a previously diverse imperial space created similar tensions right across the regions under consideration, as individuals fought for their jobs, pensions

[29] Frederick Cooper, 'Postcolonial Peoples: A Commentary', in *Europe's Invisible Migrants*, ed. Andrea L. Smith (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 169–83; Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Christoph Kalter, *Postcolonial People: The Return from Africa and the Remaking of Portugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Jean-Louis Miège and Colette Dubois, eds., *L'Europe retrouvée: les migrations de la décolonisation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995). Cf. Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[30] On the recent re-examination of reunification, see Marcus Böick, Constantin Goschler and Ralph Jessen, eds., *Jahrbuch Deutsche Einheit*, 5 (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2024). For an example of a local history of divided Germany, including reflections on reunification, see Marcel Thomas, *Local Lives, Parallel Histories: Villagers and Everyday Life in Divided Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[31] Andrew Demshuk, *Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020) and 'Exiling Marx from Karl Marx Square: The Political Lives of a Leipzig Monument before and after 1989', *Journal of Contemporary History* 59, no. 1 (2023): 11–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and property.[32] Some, as we will see, drew on their past business connections to weather the storm of economic dislocation that had interrupted their affairs, or even rode the wave of opportunities that it opened up to develop new enterprises.[33]

This special issue thus offers an invitation to rethink the post-war era from the perspective of imperial dissolution. The articles cover a range of case studies from the former Ottoman, Habsburg and German Empires, but, as we have suggested here, they describe a process that encompassed the lands of the Russian Empire and would ideally include case studies from it. Collectively, the articles hint at the similarities between the post-1918 and post-1945 periods of imperial collapse, as well as some of the legacies of these four empires that endured much further into the twentieth century. Taken together, we hope, these articles reveal that there is as much to be learned about the inter-war era by considering what was lost as what was created: if 1919 was a turning point in the creation of what Patrick Cohrs terms a 'new Atlantic order', its mirror image was a 'post-imperial disorder' in the lands of the former Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, but one that opened up possibilities for many individuals to build new futures.[34]

As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the legal transitions out of empire were far more complicated than previously thought, with lawyers imprinting new states with imperial legal heritages. The opening article in this special issue turns to the individuals who carried out this work and sought to benefit from it. Dominique Reill examines the fate of Salvatore Bellasich, a particularly enterprising lawyer who turned the short-lived city-state of Fiume into a profitable divorce mill in the early 1920s. Bellasich drew on the example of the marriage-termination industry that had developed before the War within the Habsburg Empire itself, where different citizenship laws in the Austrian and Hungarian domains had enabled Catholics from the former to divorce and remarry in the latter. In the young lawyer's post-war version, Fiume citizenship was sold to unhappily married Italian Catholics to enable them to dissolve their union in the city's jurisdiction and return to their country as eligible singles. Reill's article thereby raises important questions concerning the construction and meaning of citizenship in a post-imperial space where it could be monetised.

Establishing the boundaries of the law and citizenship was the first step in reshaping the old imperial order, but the construction of new states also necessitated a reconfiguration of the complex, multilayered structures of administration that had emerged over decades or even centuries of imperial rule. In many cases, as we might expect, the operative term was 'nationalisation'. When it came to personnel, this process involved the filtering and recruitment of individuals within the bureaucracy according to ethnic criteria that had often played little official role in the imperial administration before the war.[35] The challenges that the 'nationalisation' of bureaucracies posed for state authorities, however, and the ways in which these were approached at different levels of administration, varied from one context to another. In the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, for instance, there were very few 'purges' of personnel, and the continuity between the imperial and post-imperial bureaucracy afforded an opportunity to carry out long-planned reforms.[36] The new German-Austrian Republic,

[32]Omer Bartov, *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

[33]Máté Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos: How the Business Elites of Europe and Prospered in the Era of the Great War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[34]Patrick O. Cohrs, *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics, 1860–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[35]Peter Becker, Therese Garstenauer, Veronika Helfert, Karl Megner, Guenther Steiner and Thomas Stockinger, eds., *Hofratsdämmerung? Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2020), 113–36.

[36]Julia Bavouzet, 'The Hungarian Ministry of the Interior and Its Civil Servants in the Post-War Turmoil', in *Hofratsdämmerung? Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920*, ed. Peter Becker et al. (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2020), 113–136.

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by contrast, home to the former imperial capital Vienna, had inherited the Habsburg Empire's supranational bureaucracy, which financial straits forced it to pare down – and it did so by privileging its 'German' members.[37]

The Habsburg Empire was not unique in this respect. As Alison Carrol has shown, the transfer of Alsace-Lorraine from Germany to France as mandated by the Treaty of Versailles necessitated the adaptation of legal and bureaucratic structures established under both the Second French Empire (before 1871) and the Kaiserreich (after 1871), neither of which conformed to the centralised apparatus of the Third Republic that inherited them after 1918. The result was a series of temporary adjustments that often turned into decades-long solutions.[38] In Anatolia, meanwhile, the 'nationalisation' of the Turkish bureaucracy vied for importance with the new Republican elites' desire to purge the civil service of former Ottoman loyalists and institute an 'open', meritocratic recruitment process. These aims notwithstanding, the difficulties of introducing a new, efficient bureaucratic training process meant that much of the pre-existing personnel was maintained – especially at mid- to low-level ranks.[39]

The post-war nationalisation of imperial bureaucracies was thus a multifaceted process, and states necessarily displayed a degree of flexibility in applying new categories of national belonging, especially where key services were concerned. This is a topic that Keely Stauter-Halsted explores in this special issue, in the context of the Polish Second Republic during the early 1920s, where three pre-existing imperial bureaucracies (Russian, Habsburg and German) were merged into one. Here the state aimed, in theory, for ethnic homogeneity at all levels of administration – from one day to the next, for instance, Ukrainian railwaymen found themselves fighting for their jobs as minorities in a Polish state. As Stauter-Halsted shows, however, desperate times called for more flexibility than the central government intended, and local officials charged with the 'filtration' of lower-level employees in important services such as the railway and postal networks were open to negotiation with the individuals concerned. These individuals themselves learned to operate strategically, working around the imposed 'national' criteria by emphasising their loyalty to the Polish state in the absence of a Polish identity, thereby activating a category of citizenship that was decoupled from ethnicity.[40]

Ethnicity was but one of the categories that determined post-war belonging in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, whose legacy was divided between states of varying sovereign status – from the Turkish Republic, which gained international recognition through the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, to those regions placed under Allied rule as the 'Mandates' of Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Mesopotamia. Which of these states would be responsible for paying the retirement pensions of former Ottoman civil servants like Mehmed Ziya is the subject of Orçun Can Okan's contribution to this special issue. As Can Okan shows, the Treaty of Lausanne had technically established arrangements for the payment of civil servants' pensions, but the mobility of individuals such as Ziya within the Ottoman sphere defied the fragmentation of that space into clearly demarcated states after the fall of the empire. Having ended his career as a civil servant in Beirut, Ziya was required to claim his pension from the new Syrian state established as a French mandate, but he retired in British-controlled

[37] John Deak, 'Fashioning the Rest: National Ascription in Austria after the First World War', in *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War,* ed. Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 124–142, Gábor Egry, 'Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions', in *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 15–42; Egry et al., *Momentous Times and Ordinary People*.

[38] Alison Carrol, *The Return of Alsace-Lorraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. ch. 2; on the nationality/minority question, see Tara Zahra, 'The "Minority Problem" and National Classification in the French and Czechoslovak Borderlands', *Contemporary European History* 17, no. 2 (2008): 137–65. For a nuanced analysis of the reception of France after the war, see Sebastian Döderlein, 'Not So Republican After All?', in *Beyond the Great War: Making Peace in a Disordered World*, ed. C. Bouchard and N. Ingram (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 108–30.

[39] Olivier Bouquet, 'Old Elites in a New Republic: The Reconversion of Ottoman Bureaucratic Families in Turkey (1909–1939)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 3 (2011): 588–600.

[40] Mira Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cyprus, where his family originated. Playing on the sensibilities of his different interlocutors, Ziya therefore appealed to different aspects of his own identity in trying to fit the 'national' criteria imposed upon him. Can Okan's article therefore invites us to move beyond the question of ethnic and religious identity in the shaping of the post-Ottoman world, and to consider how individuals could make their specific situation and interests align with state institutions.

In a different context, the continuity of bureaucratic structures after the collapse of empire could in fact serve to perpetuate imperial links between metropole and colony. In Willeke Sandler's article, for instance, we discover the exchanges that took place during the 1920s between officials in the Colonial Section of the Foreign Office in Berlin, the German Consulate in Kenya and German settlers or former settlers in East Africa. The very existence of the 'Colonial Section' in the aftermath of the Kaiserreich's dissolution is a testament to the continued symbolic importance of Germany's past imperial ventures. But there was far more at stake here than mere memories. As Sandler shows, this particular department of the Foreign Office was staffed by many former colonial officials who actively promoted the resettlement of Tanganyika by Germans. These officials and settlers were well aware of their country's reduced influence in the now British mandate, but theirs was a long-term project, one in which a new colonial future might reappear on the horizon. In the meantime, all they needed to do was to keep 'a foot in the door', maintaining the German state's connection to citizens on the ground and adapting their position to a changing but still very much imperial world.

The economic disruptions and reconfigurations that accompanied the collapse of the Ottoman, Habsburg and German empires were immense. Their most salient example was perhaps that of the new Austrian republic, whose struggle to cope with the burden of its imperial past led to the most significant international bailout: in the words of Nathan Marcus, '[a]n empire had created the troubles, but the means left by which to tackle them were those of a small nation-state'.[41] At the Conference of Lausanne, meanwhile, the leaders of the new Turkish Republic struggled to free themselves from the burden of the Ottoman Empire's debt, as Mustafa Aksakal and Patrick Schilling have shown.[42] Other phoenixes that rose from the ashes of empire also faced economic constraints – the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire's unified free-trade zone, for instance, disconnected industrial Bohemia from its agricultural Hungarian hinterland and turned the Galician oil fields into an economic battleground between the new Polish and Ukrainian states.[43] The disruption of economic trade flows and business networks were felt in Alsace-Lorraine too, where local industrialists feared the loss of access to German markets that would follow from the region's incorporation into the French state.[44]

Scholars such as Patricia Clavin and Jamie Martin have considered the efforts made by international organisations to intervene in and stabilise a European and global economy affected by the disruptions of the War.[45] In particular, they have shown how quasi-colonial means of intervention that had been common before the war were repurposed to apply to 'civilised' countries.[46] More recently,

[41]Nathan Marcus, *Austrian Reconstruction and the Collapse of Global Finance, 1921–1931* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 2.

[42]Mustafa Aksakal and Patrick Schilling, 'Turkey and the Division of Ottoman Debt at Lausanne', in *They All Made Peace – What Is Peace? The 1923 Lausanne Treaty and the New Imperial Order*, ed. Jonathan Conlin and Ozan Ozavci (London: Gingko, 2023); Şevket Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries: Economic Development of Turkey since 1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[43]Alison Frank Johnson, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 205–36.

[44]Michel Hau, 'Les problèmes économiques posés par le retour de l'Alsace à la France', *Revue d'Alsace* 144 (2018): 13–28.

[45]Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy. The Reinvention if the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jamie Martin, *The Meddlers: Sovereignty, Empire, and the Birth of Global Economic Governance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

[46]Adam Tooze and Martin Ivanov, 'Disciplining "the Black Sheep of the Balkans": Financial Supervision and Sovereignty in Bulgaria, 1902–38', *Economic History Review* 64, no. 1 (2011): 30–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

however, historians have also begun to uncover the local experience of these high-level transformations, as in Tara Zahra's study of the grassroots response to 'deglobalisation' in post-war Austria.[47] By recognising the agency of individuals on the ground, these localised studies often highlight some of the gaps and loopholes that emerged in the shifting economic arrangements being imposed from above, and the room for manoeuvre that existed in these states of flux, which could at times be of great benefit to enterprising actors.

Among the 'gaps' in the global economic structures being imposed from above were the formerly imperial territories placed under the oversight of the League of Nations, such as the Saar Basin and the Free City of Danzig. It is to the latter that Anna Ross's article turns, revealing the opportunities that emerged in 'internationalised' spaces. As Ross shows, Danzig maintained something of its previous status as a free port within the Kaiserreich, but it was now oriented towards the Polish, rather than German, economic sphere, whilst remaining formally independent of both and thus spared some of their economic distress. This situation created an opening for the industrialist Ludwig Noé, 'parachuted' in to run the Danzig port, to profit from the city-state's position as a global gateway to Eastern Europe. Negotiating with the stakeholders involved, from the League to private firms, Noé worked with and around the rules imposed by the internationalisation of the city to revitalise Danzig as a centre of trade – lining his pockets in the process.

If the post-war settlement afforded Danzig an opportunity for revival as a trading nexus under international governance, it appeared to threaten the dominance of the formerly thriving port of Hamburg. Yet even for companies based here, such as the Woermann family business that is the focus of Kim Todzi's article, the post-Versailles moment did not entirely obliterate the connections that had been forged under the auspices of empire. Following the dissolution of the Kaiserreich, Todzi shows, the Woermanns, like many others, faced the expropriation of their assets in Germany's former African colonies, and thereby the possible destruction of their entire business network. Yet the company adapted to the new economic reality and prospered, 'decoupling' themselves in many ways from their previous association with the Kaiserreich. To do so, they both revived some of their long-established ties of trust in places such as Liberia and took advantage of the new opportunities that opened up to do business in the now British and French mandates from the mid-1920s onwards. Todzi thus highlights the ways in which 'imperial' business could be developed and maintained independently of the formal structures of the empire itself and invites reflection on the role that different state forms played in supporting German networks of trade and exchange, before and after the First World War.[48]

The limits of individuals' ability to eschew the scaffolding of the state, or to bend it to the needs of their business, are probed by Máté Rigo's article, which traces the fate of the Chorin family's business in Transylvania across the ruptures of 1918 and 1945. The Chorins, a family of assimilated Hungarian Jews who owned one of the largest coal enterprises in the Dual Monarchy, faced two significant but distinct challenges in these two post-war periods. After the First World War, they faced expropriation as representatives of a Hungarian business in what had become Romanian lands. However, they were able to manipulate their company's ownership structure to give it the appearance of having been 'nationalised' by the Romanian state whilst maintaining effective control. In another indication of the complexity of the post-imperial transition, Rigo argues that this doctored solution was in fact to the benefit of both the family and the state, which was in dire need of a functioning industry. During the Second World War, the Chorins' options were far more limited: as Jews in a nationalist state, they were unable to prevent their expropriation, nor to reverse its effects in the subsequent post-war settlement. Extending his analysis into the late twentieth century, Rigo in fact finds closer parallels

[47]Tara Zahra, 'Against the World: The Collapse of Empire and the Deglobalization of Interwar Austria', *Austrian History Yearbook* 52 (2021): 1–10.

[48]H. Glenn Penny, *German History Unbound: From 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between the post-1989 transition to liberal democracy in Eastern Europe and the post–First World War settlement than with the much clearer rupture of the Second World War.

In his examination of the Pordea family in post-war Transylvania, this special issue's concluding article, Gábor Egry demonstrates just how entangled the economic, bureaucratic and legal threads of empire discussed by our contributors could be. The Pordeas were able to rise to prominence in post-war Romania through a number of important connections, including their marriage alliance with prominent industrialist Max Ausnit, but also their ability to mediate between the Hungarian- and Romanian-speaking population and their expertise as lawyers defending the property rights of Hungarian capitalists that were under threat from the new state. Egry's account shows that the nationalist posturing that took place at a political level belied the reality that was being built from the bottom up – in this case, the perpetuation and revival of imperial networks that had existed before the First World War.

Egry's article thereby highlights one of the major arguments of this special issue: following the trail of individuals on the ground who sought to navigate the post-imperial landscape according to their own interests reveals a rather different image of the international order that was being created by diplomats and politicians. In many ways it was far more pragmatic. Individuals found themselves in situations that defied the neat categories envisioned from above; navigating their way through the debris of empire meant adapting and repurposing the legal, bureaucratic and economic structures and materials available to them. And for a number of these individuals, doing so opened up new avenues to make a profit. In this sense, the contributions to this issue resonate with recent work on the post–Second World War wave of decolonisation, which has suggested that the formal end of imperial rule masked a parallel process of economic reorientation to guarantee the safety of investments that had been made under empire – the 'funk money' described by Vanessa Ogle.[49] If the post-war settlement of 1919/23 was in fact the remaking of a global imperial order by the West, in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Middle East its afterlife had already begun.

Acknowledgements. The research and workshop leading to this publication were generously funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council grant 'Imperial Afterlives' (AH/W002981/1). The authors would like to thank all the participants of the 'Imperial Afterlives' Workshop held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, in August 2022, for their inspiring contributions to our discussions and to this special issue: Mustafa Aksakal, Julia Bavouzet, Peter Becker, Marcel Garboś, Aimee Genell, Georgios Giannakopoulos, Jack Guenther, Samuel Hirst, Erin Hochman, Christoph Mick, Orçun Can Okan, Steven Press, Dominique Reill, Máté Rigó, Laura Robson, Keely Stauter-Halsted, Kim Sebastian Todzi, Michelle Tusan, Willeke Sandler, and Sean Wempe. Many thanks also to Emile Chabal for his generous support and advice in bringing together this collection.

[49]Vanessa Ogle, '"Funk Money": The End of Empires, the Expansion of Tax Havens, and Decolonisation as an Economic and Financial Event', *Past & Present* 249, no. 1 (2020): 213–49.

Cite this article: Jean-Michel Johnston and Anna Ross, "Navigating Post-Imperial Transitions after the First World War: Introduction," *Contemporary European History* 34, no. 4 (November 2025): 1201–1211, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777325100957 Published online by Cambridge University Press