Introduction

How to Do Things with Empires

BARBARA BUCHENAU AND VIRGINIA RICHTER

The Demise of Empire(s) and Post-Empire Imaginaries

ONE OF THE MOMENTOUS OUTCOMES of the First World War was the demise of empires. As historians contributing to the current commemoration of this first global conflict of the twentieth century do not fail to emphasize, the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural polities of the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian double monarchy, powerful dominions over centuries, were swept away by the calamitous events of 1914–18.¹ From their ashes, new nation-states were formed that, albeit far from homogeneous themselves, were vastly different from those seemingly superannuated empires in their governmental structure, topographical dimension, and political style. The German Kaiserreich, of fairly recent formation (founded in 1871) but in some ways the self-styled inheritor of the venerable Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation, equally crumbled and was replaced by a republic. The modern age of empires seemed at an end. Alternative forms of empire that avoided explicit recourses to imperialist ideology only confirmed that the era of capitalized Empires had ended.² The across-the-board development from empire to nation-state and its


liberal, democracy-based forms of hegemony and domination was of course less uniform and inescapably teleological than it appeared to contemporaneous observers. As David Reynolds argued, for France and Great Britain the Great War proved to be an “imperial moment” in which their empires “lurched to their zenith,” expanding their spheres of influence particularly in the Middle East and Africa. But, one could in turn object, the demise of the French and British empires was only postponed, and the sweeping historical movement from empire to nation-state finally completed in the decolonizing processes after the Second World War. Ever since, not only the political existence of empires but the very concept seems to have been in decline, the celebratory yearnings of public commentators like Robert D. Kaplan and critical defences of scholars like Niall Ferguson notwithstanding.

As the contributors to this volume argue, the general idea of empire as well as the concrete histories, the cultural heritage, and the rules and rites of different empires continue to provide a rich symbolic repertoire for the present. In the face of persistent ethnic and religious conflicts, the enduring capacity of empires to pacify their different populations and to enable the internal exchange of goods, technologies, cultural practices, and ideas has recently been explored as a possible model for transnational polities such as the European Union (the public debates surrounding the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, for example, resonated strongly with considerations of post-imperial possibilities). In many cases, empires developed great tolerance, the capacity


On the ambivalent status of the EU as a post-imperial entity whose “capacity for generating loyalty and attachment remained unclear,” see Jane Burbank & Frederick