

Imperial Cities: The Tsarist Empire, the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire in Comparison

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Urban history research has recently experienced increasing interest in „imperial“ questions. One expression that is used over and over again is the „imperial city“. While this term has so far primarily been applied to the European metropolises of the western colonial empires, this conference aims to analyze the phenomenon of the imperial city in the context of the continental empires of Eastern Europe, such as the Habsburg Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. Since these empires do not draw a clear distinction between „colony“ and „motherland“, we suggest therefore that „imperial cities“ can be understood as particular cities where empire manifests itself, which are also marked by the imperial form of the state. Regarding the empires of Eastern Europe, this includes not only the metropolises of Vienna, Budapest, Istanbul or St. Petersburg, but also such multiethnic provincial cities as L'viv, Kazan or Sarajevo, border cities like Brody, Tiraspol or Belgrade, port cities such as İzmir, Trieste or Odessa, and many more.

Therefore, this conference will seek to determine how fruitful it is to call cities imperial in the context of the continental empires of Eastern Europe. What is specific about „imperial cities“ in Eastern Europe? How can questions of imperial history expand our understanding of these cities? And finally, how instructive is it to explore these empires in the light of urban history? Since we assume that imperial structures also shape cities in the long term, this conference approaches the phenomenon of imperial cities from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries based on the following three, interwoven aspects:

Cityscape: Imperial cities claim to represent the empire vis-à-vis both their own inhabitants and foreign powers, and to provide space for different population groups. To what extent does the given city meet this claim? How do areas of ethnic, religious and social entanglement relate to areas of segregation in the city?

Imperial modernization: Capital and industry accumulate in imperial cities, which thus stage themselves as sites of social and technological progress. Aiming to embody the civilizing power of the empire, they initiate civilizing campaigns on its peripheries, but at the same time they are themselves objects of modernizing interventions. How do such endeavors manifest themselves in cities, and how successful are they?

Afterlife of empire: The imperial imprint of the city often outlives the demise of the empire. Typically, „Habsburg“, „Ottoman“ or „Soviet“ buildings and quarters still shape the appearance of the city. How does the city deal with this specific heritage? Are „imperial“ buildings, streets or quarters torn down and overbuilt, are they preserved and transformed as tourist sites, or do the new rulers strive to politically re-code the imperial remains?

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