

PRIKAZI NOVIH KNJIGA I ČASOPISA

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

ALFRED J. RIEBER, THE STRUGGLE FOR EURASIAN BORDERLANDS. FROM THE RISE OF MODERN EMPIRES TO THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014.

Alfred J. Rieber (1931) is an American scholar who has devoted his academic career since late 1950s mostly to Russian and (post)Soviet studies in both Eurasian and global contexts. Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania and Professor Emeritus at the Central European University in Budapest, Rieber condenses in 640 pages and 1419 notes a book of his »lifetime«: »All books have histories; big books have long histories. Thinking back I uncover shards of memories scattered over a lifetime.« (IX) As to scholars, Owen Lattimore (1900–1989), Halil Inalcik (1916–), Lee Benson (1922–2012), Martin Wolfe (1921–2011) and Robert Hartwell (1932–1996) are the first ones he refers to in his »Acknowledgments« (IX). Eurasianist Lattimore and Ottomanist Inalcik are very »visible« in the book, the others are not quoted literally – what does not undermine their relevance in this »all books have histories« experience.

The core of the study is summarized in the first sentence of the »Introduction«: »This study argues that the great crisis of the twentieth century – the two world wars and the Cold War – had common origins in a complex historical process I call the struggle over the Eurasian borderlands.« (1) »The struggle« – taking place on two levels, »in the course of state-building« and »in the reaction of subjugated peoples«, in a way, in a bellum omnium contra omnes – which included the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, Iranian (Safavid and Qajar), and Qing multicultural empires »from above« and a long list of »subjugated peoples« »from below.« (1) Rieber points out that these continental empires, »having survived their rivalry over these same territories for centuries, collapsed in revolution and war within little more than a decade between 1911 and 1923«. (1–2)

His list of major research questions, which reminds us in particular of ten wars for those »imperial borderlands« from the Crimean War (1854–1856) up to the Korean War (1950–1953), finishes with the case of Russia: »Why was it, finally, that imperial Russia was involved directly or indirectly in most of these conflicts?« (2) The questions raised, according to Rieber, necessitate »broad comparative and transnational approach«, which has been thematized in this study in six chapters (»Imperial space« /5–78/, »Imperial ideologies: cultural practices« /79–165/, »Imperial institutions: armies, bureaucracies, and elites« /166–292/, »Imperial frontier encounters«/293–423/, »Imperial crisis«/424–531/, and »Imperial legacies« /532–614/).

Each chapter includes both conceptual controversies and distinctive reconsiderations of imperial legacies, based on a huge quantity of secondary literary sources, mostly recently published. (Curiously enough, one author and/or one book is somehow missing – Samuel P. Huntington and his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).)

The chapter »Imperial space« (5–78), consists of »Three approaches« (5–10), »Geocultural diversity in Eurasia« (10–14), »Political unity under the Mogols« (15–21), »The Ottoman Empire« (21–29), »The Iranian empires« (30–31), »The Chinese empires« (31–41), »West Eurasia« (41–49), »The Russian empire« (49–58), »Borderlands« (59–64), »Accommodation« (65–69), »Resistance« (69–77), and »An arc of flash points« (78) attracts particular attention. Eurasian geocultural diversity in la longue durée perspective is basically shaped, according to Rieber, by the encounter between pastoral nomadic societies and sedentary societies. Both types of societies are extremely differentiated. For exemple, »(n)omadic groups ranged from the tundra and taiga of the northern latitudes, south through the mixed forests and treeless grasslands to the semi-arid steppe, deserts, and eastern highlands, extending in broad, irregularly shaped bands from the Danube delta to the coasts of the Sea of Japan.« (10) Over some 2 000 years – Rieber refers to

Peter Perdue – »the horse was both the mainstay of the nomadic economy and the essential element in warfare which the sedentary civilizations could not breed in sufficient numbers for their own needs.« (11) Early modern Eurasian empires, in opposition to it, emerged on peripheries of the Mongol Empire out of the gunpowder revolution and »the manufacture of effective firearms perfected under the centralized leadership of the multicultural agrarian empires.« (11) It is an open question to what extent and how this process of Eurasian empire-building was dependent on »Far– West« European changes, recognizable by their effects in different ways all over the world since the 16th century.

Chapter II discusses problems of an »overarching imperial ideology« and of »a set of cultural practices aimed at binding together peoples of different ethnic, religious, and regional loyalties.« (79) Four aspects are taken into consideration: /1/ a divinely inspired dynastic succession, /2/ a founding myth, /3/ »a set of cultural practices designed to glorify the ruler's authority, project his power, and intimidate his subjects and foreign rivals«, and /4/ »a symbolic imagining of borderlands as an intrinsic manifestation of imperial power.« (79)

Chapter III, par excellence Weberian, deals with the ways in which the army, the bureaucracy, and the ruling elites »reflected the particular needs of a multicultural state in expanding and defending its military frontiers and imposing order in the borderlands.« All those empires were multicultural. At the same time they were based on unstable, changing balances between sedentary and nomadic structures, as well as agrarian and urban ones, implying that »the personal authority of the ruler depended heavily on his ability to project myths, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies of power that had meaning for peoples of different cultures.« (166) Secondly, »the army proved time and time again to be the glue of imperial rule.« Military revolutions following one another over half a millenium affected warfare accross all those imperial borderlands, changing structures of imperial power and in particular of its military forces: »In the end, the collapse came about when the loyalty and cohesion of the army began to dissolve. Long serving as the glue of imperial rule, the army ultimately became its solvent«! Rieber's definition of bureaucracy in early modern Eurasian empires is also meeting demanding requirements of a large variety of phenomena, stressing its dual function: »first, mobilizing human and financial resources for the support of the armed forces; and, second, devising administrative policies along a wide spectrum ranging from assimilation to autonomy at securing the acceptance of imperial rule by the diverse populations of the conquered borderlands who were accustomed to different cultural practices.« (167) The case-studies ranging from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the Qing China discover, on the one hand, that the imperial institutions proved to be »surprisingly flexible in meeting repeated challenges to internal order and external security arising from the struggle over the borderlands.« (290) On the other hand, the challenge to imperial rule posed by Western ideas confronted each of them with the problem »how to justify change that appeared to be culturally subversive«. (291–292)

Chapter IV begins with a crucial assumption that early modern Eurasian frontiers became »less a zone of encounter between nomadic and sedentary societies and more a zone of encounters between organized state systems based on agricultural communities and urban centers...« Rieber introduces the notion of complex frontiers, what makes it possible to redefine related borderlands: »As the conquest states carved out territories within these frontiers, annexed and incorporated them, these borderlands did not cease to become sites of external and internal conflicts.« (293) From the 16th to the mid- to late 18th century Eurasian imperial »players« were not the same ones at those from the 18th century up to the beginning of the 20th century. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned by its rivals, the Ottoman Empire was withdrawing on all sides, the Safavid rule was replaced by the Qajars, giving up territories in the south Caucasus to the Romanov rule. The Qing reached the apogee of its power and began to lose influence in Inner Asia. The Romanov were acquiring it in this borderland, too. Actually, »Russia gradually gained ascendancy over its rivals, which it maintained until the second decade of the twentieth century.« (294) Related to those changes, the author follows emergence of processes of nation-building »from below« within and across imperial borderlands, paying particular attention to each of the seven borderlands.

Chapter V focuses upon a very short period from 1905 to 1911 marked by constitutional crisis that »prefigured the greater upheavals and collapse of imperial rule in the period from 1917 to 1923.« (424) The structure of this chapter has been changed in comparison with the previous ones and instead paying particular attention to empires it is concentrated upon distinctive imperial borderlands. For example, in the case of the Habsburg Empire these are Galicia, Bohemia, Hungary, and Bosnia, etc. Far the most extensive is Rieber's narrative on Russia at that time, what is justified by far-reaching consequences of profound changes taking place either within Russia or in Russian »struggles« with its rivals from the Habsburg Empire to China and, for the first time, Japan. The conclusion of the Russian sub-chapter is a surprise: »In the prolonged struggle over the borderlands between their imperial domains, the Habsburg and Russian rulers and key figures in their ruling elites has arrived at similar conclusions about the transcendent importance of Serbia in maintaining their vaunted status as a Great Power. Closely related was their belief that Serbia represented a vital link in their security systems.« Having in mind that at the Berlin Congress the international status of Serbia, as well as of other South-East European states was another one, one has to say that it is not plausible in this particular case that it would not be possible to renegotiate strategic interests of both the Habsburg Empire and Russia! One would say that it is less about Serbia and much more about the logic of the alliance systems: »Both sides hoped for a localized conflict. However, the alliance system virtually guaranteed that a local war in the old Triplex Confinium would rapidly metastasize.« (497) It was not for the first time since the Utrecht 1713 that the logic of alliance systems failed to guarantee peace settlement of international conflicts! Unfortunately, the logic of warfare in 1914 irrationalized those conflicts beyond abilities to control them bureaucratically in democratically underdeveloped political systems.

Chapter VI summarizing »imperial legacies«, Rieber insists on both discontinuities and continuities in Eurasian post-imperial successor states. His conclusions are precise and one has to say justifiable: »First, the Eurasian successor states were all multinational except for Austria and Hungary where, however, Jews and Roma were perceived as culturally distinctive, if not alien. Second, the new states were saddled with borderlands of their own that were also located, as under imperial rule, on the peripheries of the centers of power. Third, the borderlands were often inhabited by mixed populations, reshuffled by a new turn of the demographic kaleidoscope. Fourth, the external and internal administrative borders of the successor states were arbitrarily drawn – like those of the empires, almost everywhere as a result of military action – cutting through communities of the same ethnicity, exciting new irredentist claims based on historicist and national grounds. Fifth, this meant that ethnic politics invaded every aspect of cultural policy, especially education.« (533)

II

One cannot resist not to express professional respect in front of such a passionate, but at the same time scholarly rationalized devotion to the topic of Eurasian imperial borderlands over half a millenium. Rieber's study is an important contribution to current discussions on Eurasian world in global history, which has been realized by shifting a focus of the research from southern to northern, from maritime to continental tracks of »Far West«–»Far East« interconnectedness over the Early Modern Age – to put it in terms of a European periodization. In his interpretation, global horizon of investigated Eurasian »struggles« is primarily shaped by multiplicity of imperial answers to European challenges of multiple modernizations. To quote the author, »(t)his book does not seek to evoke nostalgia for empire; still less is it a celebration of nationalism, sentiments all too prevalent in historical writing since the end of the Cold War.« (3) It is the book about »the complexity of state-building Eurasia; the persistence of problems that geographical and cultural diversity posed to the rulers and the ruled in their different aspirations; and the variety of responses – reform, repression, revolt – that they devised to resolve these problems.« (3)

Only once in premodern history, in the 13th–14th centuries the nomadic Mongol Empire – stretching from Central Europe to Yellow Sea, from the Southern Siberia to the Persian Gulf – dominated the Eurasian continental space. Since the early 18th century up the the early 20th century only the modern

Russian empire – reaching both Central Europe and the Pacific Ocean (even Alaska!), as well as the Northern Sea and Inner Asian deserts – succeeded to extend in comparable sizes, but emerged and collapsed, too. (Nevertheless, a comparison between contemporary Mongolia and contemporary Russia make these two cases of imperial legacies profoundly different ones.) That makes Russia a particular case in a comparative and transnational early modern history of Eurasian empires. None of the others, investigated in this study, with the exception of the Ottoman Empire, is literally Eurasian. Even today, contemporary Turkey, due to the fact that its capital, Istanbul, including its huge urban network, is Eurasian, makes the country a genuine candidate for the accession to the European Union. Today's Russia, in opposition to today's Turkey, which makes a big part of the European continent, is practically never perceived as a genuine European state.

What makes this book recognizable among quite a lot of the others recently published on empires in global perspectives is no doubt its focus upon imperial borderlands. In opposition to still prevailing geopolitical and/or civilizational approaches, Rieber accepts and innovatively develops geocultural approach, based on theoretical assumptions of French traditions of Paul Vidal de La Blache's human geography, Lucien Febvre's reinterpretation of it in the *Annales*, as well as of recent Michel Foucher's contributions on frontiers, etc. Summing it up, Rieber says that »climate and soil, the contours of the land, abundance or lack of navigable rivers, proximity to seas, all present possibilities as well as imposing constraints on human action. But they do not determine historical development, the distribution and concentration of power, or specific policy choices«. (8) Such an approach defines imperial borderlands as »an ambiguous process«. (8) They are »fluid rather than fixed and immutable concepts, subject to change over time, not wholly imagined, yet endowed with ideological meaning by intellectuals and politicians to serve statist aims, whether imperial or national«. (8)

Geocultural approach to early modern and modern Eurasian history – including a large variety of natural environments, as well as of »culture groups drawn from Germanic, Slavic, Turcic, Mongol, and Chinese ethnolinguistic groups, and Christian (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), Judaic, Muslim, and Buddhist believers over vast distances«, scattered and intermingled with each other, within changing geopolitical frameworks and over long periods of time – makes »struggle« for the Eurasian borderlands the most important research aspect in this study, which makes more comprehensive that history than probably any other approach in the historiography today. In opposition to changing number of imperial actors in the early modern history (marginalized Sweden, partitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, subjugated Dzungaria, etc.), imperial borderlands are, according to Rieber, seven: »the Baltic littoral, the Danubian frontier, the Pontic steppe, the Caucasian isthmus, Trans Caspia, and Inner Asia, ...« (2). The missing one on this page is otherwise minutely discussed the Triplex Confinium, shared by the Habsburgs, the Ottomans and the Serenissima.

III

One cannot follow in great details in this review Rieber's convincing narratives, focusing upon above-mentioned imperial case-studies. They are too »thick«. But, one can justify his comparative and transnational approach to them, which enables a reader to understand distinctive imperial »logics« in changing historical circumstances.

The Ottoman Empire, rooted in great migrations of nomadic Turkic tribes (originating from Trans Caspia) towards the Mediterranean, »emerged from the fusion of three cultural streams: Islamic messianism; the Turkic warrior ethos, and the Byzantine imperial tradition.« (25) Such an interpretation is based on substitution of the traditional »Ghazi Thesis« by a thesis about Islamo-Christian syncretism in the early modern history of the Ottoman Empire. (26) The turning point in the history of the Ottoman Empire occurred at the end of the 18th century, along with the advancement of the process of its transformation into the »periphery« of major competing continental and maritime empires. At the same time, legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire was contested from below, among »subjugated peoples« all over three-continental imperial peripheries.

Chinese empire in the periods of the Han Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1918) experienced profoundly changing interactions between sedentary and nomadic populations in the continental borderlands, establishing »precedents for subsequent dealings with the Western maritime powers on China's coastal frontier« in the 19th century. (33) None of the borderlands' strategies, in particular in Mongolia and Xinjiang, as well as on coastal frontiers, was successful at that time, encouraging competing empires, from Russia to Japan and European »Far–West«, to transform China in one way or another in their own »peripheries«.

»West Eurasia«, stretching from the Baltic and the Adriatic seas to the east, included polycentric cluster of mutually inclusive/exclusive dynastic aspirations embedded in mutually interrelated geocultural nuclei. The Habsburg Empire, for example, emerged out of the process of dynastic peripheral »self-containment« in both Central and South-East Europe. It was constituted as an early modern imperial power in confrontation with the Ottoman Empire in the continental South-East and with the Venetian Republic in the maritime South-East. Both aspirations were limited either by powers like Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russia, as well as Great Britain and France. It did it by constructing military frontiers (Militär Grenzen) along borders with the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Republic, better to say, turning contested borderlands into complex frontier military, customs, and sanitary systems – based to a large extent upon quasi-total militarization of »subjugated peoples«. Those peoples were settled down either by immigrations from the Ottoman Empire, or colonizations from various dynastic possessions. Constructing military frontiers, the Habsburgs actually established an uncomparable pattern of autocratic imposition of bureaucratic institutionalized reshaping of a variety of Croatian, Serbian, German, Hungarian, and Romanian communities having mutually contradictory aspirations in the prolonged »Spring of Nations« in the 19th century, either within or beyond the Habsburg borderlines. But, one has to add that the Habsburgs not only up to 1804 as emperors of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, but also later on up to 1918, as emperors of the Austrian Empire /emperors and kings of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy since 1867/, were fighting for their imperial borderlands – mataphorically – across the rest of Europe.

Early modern »logic« of conflicts in struggles over imperial borderlands in Europe were not basically comparable to the Eurasian ones, in geocultural terms, since the 18th century. The 16th and the 17th centuries witness quite a lot of shared experiences up to the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) and the Great Turkish War (1683–1699). Peace and Friendship Treaties of Utrecht (1713) marked the turning point in Europe, in spite of the fact that human and material prices of European wars, either in Europe or across the world progressed exponentially from the 18th century through to the 20th century.

IV

One needs to limit oneself only to two comments:

(1) The dichotomy »empire« vs. »subjugated peoples«, consequentially applied in this study, sometimes does not correspond to detailed, complex, sophisticated and, one has to underline, convincing Rieber's interpretations, having in mind the period from the 16th century to the 18th century. Are non-privileged Russians not »a subjugated people« in the Russian Empire as imperial subjects as any other ethnic community? What about privileged non-Russians? When it is about Russification of the Russian Empire, Russians are definitely not in the same situation as those ones who do not either speak or write Russian, who do not want either to speak or to write it, etc., etc. But, what about imperial lingua franca? Irrespectively of individual/communal attitudes towards, let us say again, Russian in the Russian Empire, when is it historically legitimate to speak about imperial lingua franca beyond bureaucratic logics of Russification? There are quite another problems of interrelationship between linguistic usage, imperial design, and linguistic identity of »subjugated people« as, for example, in the case of the Persian language in the Ottoman Empire, in particular among educated elites. Was the usage of the Arab language in the Ottoman Empire comparable in any situation to the usage of the Greek language? Were there not different logics of »subjugated« vs. »dominant« in the Ottoman Empire? Changing interrelationships between

the Manchu and the Han peoples during the Qing dynasty (1644–1918), in particular in changing historical contexts of struggles for Chinese imperial borderlands, interpreted by the author in a magnificent way, produce conclusions about relative importance of a dichotomy »dominant« vs »subjugated«. The originally Kurdish and Azerbaijani Safavid dynasty (1501–1722, 1729–1736), as well as the Persianized Turic Qajar dynasty in the Iranian Empire (1785–1925) reduced to the dichotomic logic of »dominant« vs »subjugated« peoples in the Iranian history of those periods could only provoke misunderstandings. The point is, one has to repeat, that the author's logic of interpretation is occasionally above the logic of some notions he uses.

Of course, there is no doubt that nation-building processes, taking place all over Eurasia, either earlier or later in the 19th and 20th centuries, put all those questions in different perspectives and concrete historical contexts, as it has been proved by the author of this study himself, but it does not mean that, under changing circumstances, transnational challenges lost their relevance.

(2) Opposing to historical determinism of inherited geopolitical and civilizational approaches to Eurasian history, the author announces that his study will interpret »Eurasia, its frontiers, and borderlands as spaces shaped by complex historical processes forming a geocultural context in which great conflicts of the twentieth century will be situated«. (5) Irrespectively of the unquestionable legitimacy of the post factum standpoint, one has to put a question whether a Eurasian »geocultural context in which great conflicts of the twentieth century will be situated« is the only one or just one of them. To exemplify: Does the German national socialist Lebensraum project come out of the German geocultural context or, let us say, another one or even more of them? Namely, referring to the post-1918 period in the sub-chapter »Conclusion« of the chapter »Imperial legacies«, Rieber finishes by predicting: »But it was just a matter of time before the only potential great power rivals for hegemony in the borderlands, Germany and the Soviet Union, would recover their strength or, in the case of Japan, decide to employ it in what was to become the next and most destructive period in the struggle over the borderlands«. (614) The very last sentence of the study, at the end of the »Conclusion: Transition«, omits the Soviet Union and adds attributes to Germany and Japan: »Taking advantage of the weakness of the successor states, a revived Germany under Hitler and a militarist Japan were prepared by the early 1930s to renew the struggle over the Eurasian borderlands. From Manchuria to the Sudentenland, they began their campaign to destroy the postwar settlement order and erect their own new order based on new ideologies and new levels of violence«. (617)

Reading carefully this study, if the a specialist for Eurasian studies, one unavoidably changes her/his view upon frontiers and borderlands in the history of the world – not only of Eurasia – and one cannot avoid some kind of a conclusion that there is nothing changing conditions of human life somewhere far away from us that will not affect either us or our decedents. Eurasia for the majority of us outside the spaces taking into consideration in this study of Alfred J. Rieber is just a myth, sometimes instrumentalized today either in Russia or Turkey, probably somewhere else, too. After carefully reading this book, hopefully everybody will have another feeling about global history studies.

Drago ROKSANDIĆ

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