

Call for Papers

“The Empire and I – Individuals in Empires and Postimperial Spaces”

28th– 30th November 2024, University of Freiburg, Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany)

Analysing the relations between individuals and empires has a long tradition in historiography: from the biographies of “great men” to more recent approaches such as “imperial biographies” and “imperial subjects”. And while the first has rightly been criticised in the past, the latter have shown that there is significant analytical value in studying individuals even when trying to understand macro-phenomena such as empires.

As individuals can function as the smallest analytical units for exploring of broader historical developments, focusing on them can shed light on more general political, economic, and social dynamics. Retracing the activities of individuals, therefore, can be used to analyse the factors that shaped living conditions within imperial and postimperial spaces. This approach also opens up new perspectives on the agency of individuals and the strategies they could and did use to thrive and persist within or resist imperial environments.

Focusing on individuals also offers possibilities to grasp their influence on empires. Individual actors impacted the way empires evolved, for instance by making use of imperial structures or policies for their own gains. Moreover, the ways individuals thought, spoke, and wrote about imperial environments illustrate how empires are perceived and conceptualised to this day.

The relationships between empire and individual can therefore be approached not just through historiography but through a multitude of disciplines and for different time periods and regions. The third annual conference of the RTG 2571 “Empires” likewise aims to examine the relations between individuals and empires from different perspectives.

Contributions to the conference could discuss topics such as:

- Social and spatial mobility of individuals in (post-) imperial orders.

Empires often offered career options that facilitated upward social mobility, for example in military or administrative service. At the same time, imperial expansion and integration could challenge existing social orders and established elites or even cause the uprooting and precarisation of large groups of individuals from all social backgrounds. Thus, empires created opportunities for upward mobility as well as dangers of social decline. Who was able to make use of these possibilities? How did old elites try to defend their existing privileges and socio-economic status against emerging imperial actors? Who was deprived of their social status?

Moreover, empires facilitated and depended on long-distance transportation, communication and movement of individuals, or even forced the deportation and expulsion of people. How did, for example, the emergence and intensification of overseas trade in imperial spaces create opportunities and necessities to undertake voyages? How did military campaigns or the trade in humans lead to the scattering of peoples to distant regions? How did individuals reflect on the dimension of imperial spaces? How and why did imperial agents enable or enforce migration? How and why did they promote or try to regulate human transportation?

- Identity construction and (post-)imperial orders.

Empires were multilingual, multireligious, and multiethnic polities. In various empires, this heterogeneity was handled in a multitude of ways by both the authorities and the individuals themselves. Sometimes imperial policies led to efforts of regulating heterogeneous groups of subjects and thereby creating new categories of identification, some of which were voluntarily accepted while others were forced upon people. At other times, subjects adopted new identities on their own. In what ways did (post-)imperial orders shape – and were shaped by – processes of identity construction and self-perceptions of individuals? How did individuals describe themselves within an empire? How were subjects represented by imperial administrations, and how did such representations shape their self-perception? What were the consequences of imperial narratives and policies on individual identity constructions? What factors contributed to phenomena such as “fluid identities”?

- Individuals and imperial institutions.

To govern their territory, empires relied on a plethora of administrative bodies, consisting of legal, political, religious, and educational institutions. Individuals were often required to interact with these institutions, as they were the points of intersection between the imperial government and its subjects. They were symbols of imperial power as well as channels of bilateral – albeit not equal – communication. Consequently, individuals tried to engage with imperial institutions to achieve personal goals, such as seeking justice in imperial courts, acquiring offices in imperial bureaucracies or influencing imperial policy. How and to what end did individuals engage in, resist, ignore, or abstain from imperial institutions? How did such engagement – or lack thereof – shape their own biographies, and that of their descendants? What consequences did it have for the establishment and persistence of imperial rule? What was the nature of “imperial collaborators”, “middlemen”, or “opposing agents”, and how were they defined as such? What were their motivations?

Application

We welcome contributions from all the humanities and social sciences as well as hybrid sciences. We especially encourage scholars in the early stages of their career (PhD & Postdocs) to submit proposals.

Interested applicants are invited to send a working title, an abstract (c. 400 words) for a presentation of 20 minutes and a short CV (no more than two pages) to empires@grk2571.uni-freiburg.de by 29/02/2024. Any further queries can be directed to the same address.

Accommodation in Freiburg will be organised and covered by the RTG “Empires”. We will also reimburse presenters for their travel expenses.

Presenters will be asked to provide a first draft of their paper at least two weeks prior to the conference. After the conference, we intend to publish the papers in an edited volume. The conference is the third of a series of annual conferences organised by the DFG Research Training Group 2571 “Empires: Dynamic Transformation, Temporality and Postimperial Orders” (University of Freiburg). More information on the conference and the RTG can be found at: <https://www.grk2571.uni-freiburg.de/events/conferences/annual-conference-2024>

