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JEREMY F. WALTON

Post-Empire: A Prolegomenon to the Study of  
Post-Imperial Legacies and Memories

Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

*Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften*



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
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## Abstract

The recent renaissance of empire/imperialism as a category within political and scholarly discourse has been accompanied by a remarkable efflorescence of collective memories of bygone empires. In this essay, I forward a broad, supple model for the study of legacies and collective memories of empires. After sketching the recent field of (post)imperial discourse, I offer a general theory of the relationship between (collective) memory as the impact of the present on the past and (historical) legacy as the impact of the past on the present. Next, drawing on Achille Mbembe's seminal concept of the postcolony, I propose an analogous concept, "post-empire." Following this, I offer a loose methodology for the study of post-empires via a tripartite focus on post-imperial persons, post-imperial places, and post-imperial things. To illustrate this methodology, the essay concludes with a series of sites and examples from my research in former Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov/Russian contexts.

**Keywords:** post-imperialism, collective memory, historical legacy, Habsburg Empire; Ottoman Empire; Romanov Empire

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## Introduction: Empires Strike Back

In recent years, bygone empires have dramatically refused to remain confined to the past. Like revenants brimming with new, unanticipated vigour, a host of former empires has become uncannily present, striking back in a variety of forms, from new monuments to rose-tinted political movements. Brexiteers clad in the Union Jack and Rule Britannia paraphernalia in London, gargantuan statues of Alexander the Great in Skopje (Graan 2013) and Peter the Great in Moscow (Grant 2002), restored Ottoman caravanserais and mosques in central Europe and the Balkans (Walton 2016), Viennese-style cafes in Trieste (Carabelli 2019), Budapest, and Lviv, and pilgrimages to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo all illustrate the sudden, vivid recrudescence of empires and imperialisms.

From the perspective of the late 20th century—an epoch that now seems suddenly distant—this revival of imperial fascination is astonishing. According to most standard historiographic accounts, the 20th Century marked, and was marked by, the end of empire. Within a staggeringly brief period of roughly eighty years, both the vast land-based empires of Eurasia and the overseas colonial empires of European states that aspired to encircle the globe shattered into a plethora of new nation-states. Three pivotal moments of political disjuncture and transformation framed and punctuated this process. First, the Great War and its aftermath entailed the dismemberment of three massive continental empires, the Habsburg, Ottoman and Prussian, while the Romanov Empire was consumed in the conflagration of the October Revolution. The Treaty of Versailles enshrined a vision of the world as a patchwork of nation-states, even as it also laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new quasi-imperial power in central Europe, the Third Reich (Mazower 2008). Indeed, after the setbacks of World War I, empire as a political form gained a lease on life during the interwar period in the form of fascist imperialisms: Nazi, but also Italian and Japanese. The second critical moment in empire's decline immediately followed World War II, when, in a period of a little more than a decade, the colonial empires of Western European powers—principally Great Britain, France and the Netherlands—came to a dramatic end in a tidal wave of decolonisation.<sup>1</sup> Although several imperial

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1 Given the recent ascendancy of the concept of decoloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) in critical interrogations of post-imperialism—especially related to the distinction between the “decolonial” and the “postcolonial”—a brief remark on this designation is in order. While I aspire for the concept of post-empire to intervene productively in debates over decoloniality and post-colonialism, in this context I use decolonisation as a simple description for the end of direct colonial governance on the part of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and other European colonial empires that persisted until the mid-20th Century. This is by no means to deny the crucial point made by Kwame Nkrumah in 1965, during at the apex of this era:

powers—notably Portugal—gripped firmly to their colonies for several decades longer, by the second half of the century, colonial imperialism, erected on ideologies of the racial and civilizational supremacy of Europe, was no longer a viable model for political life. Even as decolonization swept the globe, however, neo-colonialism (Nkrumah 1965) and imperialism persisted in transmogrified forms during the Cold War, with both the Soviet Union and the United States donning the geopolitical mantles of erstwhile empires. The end of the Cold War in 1989, powerfully symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, constituted the third key moment in the 20th century dismantlement of empire. By the end of the century—reckoned by (neo)liberal apologists as no less than the end of history—the international order of independent nation-states had become globally hegemonic. Empire was consigned to history’s dustbin.

It is remarkable, then, that empire has struck back forcefully in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In both popular and scholarly evaluations (e.g. Cooper 2004), empire as a concept and historical touchstone seems to offer an indispensable perspective on the geopolitical tribulations of our day. For many, the unrivalled military might of the United States of America in the post-9/11 era, as well as the “blowback” (Johnson 2004) that this global regime of power has incited, warrants comprehension as an empire (see also Kelly et. al. 2010). More abstractly, thinkers of the Left such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001, 2019) have argued that the concept of empire effectively captures the asymmetries and alienations of political economy in the present. In a distinct but consonant manner, postcolonial critics (e.g. Chakrabarty 2000; Duara 2004; Gopal 2019; Mehta 1999; Mishra 2013) insist that the ongoing effects of the former colonial empires are inseparable from global inequalities today. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, defunct empires and their legacies have increasingly become the objects of collective memory, nostalgia, aspiration, identification, and criticism in a variety of public forums.

This final development—the recent consolidation of collective memories of empires—has yet to galvanize the scholarly attention that it warrants. There are both disciplinary and conceptual reasons for this lacuna. While indispensable revisionist histories of empires and imperialism have made welcome additions to bookshelves and conversations in recent decades,<sup>2</sup> the debates that they have inspired remain to some extent siloed

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“Decolonisation...is a word much and unctuously used by imperialist spokesmen to describe the transfer of political control from colonialist to African sovereignty. The motive spring of colonialism, however, still controls the sovereignty...Colonialism has achieved a new guise... And neo-colonialism is fast entrenching itself lwithin the body of Africa today” (Nkrumah 1965, quoted in Khalili 2021).

2 See Pieter Judson (2016), Jeremy King (2002), and Tara Zahra (2008) on the Habsburgs, Edhem Eldem (1999), Karen Barkey (2008), Fatma Müge Göçek (2011), and Halil İnalçık



within the historians' guild. The emergent field of memory studies has begun to grapple with cultures of memory relative to many different epochs and events, but its initial focus has been predominantly on collective memories of the 20th Century (Rigney 2018: 371), with particular attention to World War II and the Holocaust (e.g. Assmann and Hartman 2012).<sup>3</sup> Finally, anthropologists and scholars of postcolonialism and decoloniality have justifiably insisted on the persistence of imperial powers, patterns, and effects beyond the cessation of empires as polities. Such interrogations of "imperial duress" (Stoler 2016) have marshalled a critique of memory as a concept—as Ann Laura Stoler writes "Memory suggests that the past resides predominantly in how we find to remember it, rather than in the durable and intangible forms of its making. Colonial entailments endure in more palpably complicated ways" (ibid.: 35). Certainly, the "presentism" (Hartog 2015) and whiff of instrumental choice that characterizes this romance of memory—the notion that "the past resides ... in how we find to remember it"—is insufficient to account for empires' ongoing effects in the present. Nevertheless, the recent elaboration and sophistication of collective memories of empires, and their entanglement with imperial duress and durability, demand a reckoning.

Much of my own recent research<sup>4</sup> has attempted to grapple with these dilemmas surrounding the study of empire as collective memory. I have done so with reference to the aftermaths and afterlives of two of the empires that fundamentally shaped and reshaped central and southeast Europe and the Middle East from the 15th to the 20th Centuries: the Habsburg and the Ottoman. For the programmatic purposes of this essay, I rely on figures, events, and sites from the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, as well as the Romanov. First, however, the general framework of our endeavour requires expansion and buttressing.

In brief, *the study of past empires in the present demands a double focus on the dialectical relationship between post-imperial memories and post-imperial legacies*. This double focus entails an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the methods and insights of memory studies, on one hand, and postcolonial/decolonial studies and anthropological approaches to empire, on the other. Ongoing historical research on empires is also a fundament for this endeavour, even as its aim—to interrogate the textures and tribulations of empires that are no more—differs from that of imperial history. More

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(2013) for the Ottomans, and Dominic Lieven (2000), Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remenev (2007), and Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Suny (2016) on the Romanovs and Soviets.

3 Ann Rigney notes the parallel tendency of memory studies to focus on violence and trauma: "the field of cultural memory studies has unquestionably gravitated towards violence and its collective legacies" (Rigney 2018: 369).

4 See Walton (2016, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020a; 2020b) and Carabelli et. al. (2020).

abstractly, the approach to memories and legacies that I propose summons two distinct, inverse relationships between the past and present. Legacies comprehend the plethora of effects that the past continues to have on the present. As a concept, “legacy” can be summarized as *the force that the past exerts on the present*. Conversely, and according to this formulation, memory comprehends the myriad ways in which the present forms and articulates the past. As a concept, “memory” can be summarized as *the force that the present exerts on the past*. Legacies and memories of empires intertwine to shape and condition the distinctive object of study for the type of scholarship that I propose here: the *post-empire*. Below, I expand on the concept of the post-empire, which draws inspiration from Achille Mbembe’s (2001) hallmark concept of the postcolony. But first, a more thorough overview of memory and legacy in relation to empires is apposite.

## Empires of Memory and Inter-Imperial Formations

Although “collective memory” has occupied scholars across a variety of fields since Maurice Halbwachs (1992) coined the concept in the mid-20th century, the consolidation of memory studies as a coherent, interdisciplinary endeavour has only transpired in recent years (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). While memory studies is a vast, protean field, its call to theorize collective memory as an inherently political matter (Verovšek 2016) is a welcome remedy to the depoliticizing logic of heritage, which often reverberates in “heritage studies” as well.<sup>5</sup> However, this emphasis on the political dimensions of collective memories has yet to yield a comprehensive vocabulary for theorizing collective memories of polities, including empires.

Despite the ample criticisms that his work has attracted (Huysen 2003: 23-24; Hartog 2015; Stoler 2016: 158), Pierre Nora’s (1989) ambitious project to map the *lieux de mémoire* that saturate and orient France remains a worthy template for such a project (as his status as a grey eminence of memory studies attests). Nora’s introduction of the term “*lieu*”/“site” to the study of collective memory was revolutionary, yet elaborations of the concept have frequently obscured its original capaciousness. It is often forgotten that sites of memory include not only physical spaces and places, but also an array of material and discursive forms that objectify memories, including literature, images, archives, dates, and commemorative objects of all sorts. As Nora writes,

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5 For critical perspectives on the depoliticizing effects of heritage, see MacDonald (2008), Hartog (2015) and Berliner (2020).

*Lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls for memory because it has abandoned it ... Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are the boundary stones of another age (ibid.: 12).

My ambition in this context is to expand and to streamline Nora's perspective on sites of memory by forwarding a tripartite heuristic of *persons*, *places*, and *things*. Collective memories of bygone polities achieve different accents and effects in their distinct *personifications*, *emplacements*, and *materializations*. And while this typological trio is not specific to post-imperial memories, its affinities with post-imperial cultures of memory are striking, as I illustrate more thoroughly below.

A more specific facet of collective memories of empire—what I call *empires of memory*—relates to the distinctive spatial logic of empires. Unlike nation-states, which privilege and naturalize homogeneous, uniform space and time (Anderson 1983), empires were frequently characterized by spatial open-endedness. The contrast between the border and the frontier captures this distinction well. Imperial space, unlike national space, was differentially related to political-economic centres, especially on its margins. Consequently, the spatial and political relations between empires were different than the “zero-sum” relations between and among nation-states: They were “analogue” rather than “digital,” in the sense that they admitted intermediary statuses and sites that could not easily be categorized as “inside” or “outside” of the polity. These “analogue” relationships resulted in vectors of mutual influence between empires that were figured differently than international relations.

Laura Doyle's concept of “inter-imperiality” (2014, 2020) effectively highlights the formative quality of relationships between and among empires: “Inter-imperial analysis is multiply dialectical. It seeks to understand the ways that all formations are mutually contingent co-formations. It tracks all agents as they are caught up in a circuitry of uneven and dynamic interdependence” (2014: 191). Inter-imperial exchanges, antagonisms, and influences were especially dense among the three empires that orient my ongoing inquiries. Beyond the diplomatic history of alliances, competitions, and wars, the Habsburgs, Ottomans, and Romanovs achieved self-definition in contrast to and conversation with their imperial neighbours.<sup>6</sup> The empires shared frontiers: the Habsburgs and Ottomans in the Balkans; the Ottomans and Romanovs in the Caucasus and the Crimea; the Romanovs

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6 For studies of the exchanges, rivalries, and mutual influences between and among the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian Empires see Barkey and von Hagen (1997); Hartmuth and Sindbaek (2011); Scheer (2013); Anievas and Nişancıoğlu (2015); and Bartov and Weitz (2013).

and Habsburgs in Galicia and Bukovina. For several centuries, all three exerted influence over a triple frontier in what is now Romania. Despite intermittent antagonisms, the empires exchanged goods, people, technologies, fashions, and ideas across these frontiers. Concomitantly, any study of study of contemporary collective memories of the Habsburgs, Ottomans, and Romanovs must account for the manner in which such memories mirror and shape one another today. Post-imperial collective memories are necessarily inter-imperial, as well, and inter-imperial persons, places and things are especially fecund sites of and for post-imperial collective memories.

## Imperial Legacies

Empires of memory have expanded recently, as empires are wont to do. However, their robustness and kaleidoscopic variety should not distract attention from the other ways in which imperial pasts continue to shape the present. In order to capture this, we must supplement and complement the concept of memory with that of legacy.

Maria Todorova's pioneering work, *Imagining the Balkans* (2007), offers a robust model for the interpretation of imperial legacies beyond explicit formations of post-imperial memory. The bulk of Todorova's argument interrogates the discourse of "balkanism" on the part of travel writers, artists and administrators from central and western Europe. Drawing on Edward Said's famous argument in *Orientalism* (1978), Todorova argues that balkanism has "imagined" south-eastern Europe as a peculiar type of space and "a symbol for the aggressive, intolerant, barbarian, semi-developed, semi-civilized, and semi-oriental" (Todorova 2007: 194). Nonetheless, a key distinction between balkanism and Orientalism stems from the relationship between the discursive constructions and historical legacies in the case of the former: "The main difference between the two concepts is the geographic and historical concreteness of the Balkans versus the metaphorical and symbolic nature of the Orient ... which challenge(s) the scholar to deal with the ontology of the Balkans, rather than simply with its metaphoric functions" (ibid.: 194).<sup>7</sup>

Leaving aside questions over Todorova's evaluation of Orientalism, and, for that matter, her preoccupation with the "ontology" of the Balkans, I draw inspiration from her capacious definition of historical legacy:

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7 See Todorova (2007: 192 ff.) for her further thoughts on the relationship between the Balkans and postcolonial critique, including her argument against interpreting the Ottoman Empire as a colonial polity.

Historical legacy retains the valuable features of spatiality while simultaneously refining the vector of time, making it more historically specific ... while tradition involves a conscious selection of elements bequeathed from the past, *legacy encompasses everything—chosen or not—that is handed down from the past*. In this sense, legacy neither betrays the past nor surrenders it to active meddling. Legacy may be exalted or maligned by successors, but this comes as a secondary process. Legacy as an abstract signifier is neutral (ibid.: 198).<sup>8</sup>

While collective memory necessarily works on, and through, historical legacies, it should by no means be equated with them.

Todorova's concept of historical legacy resonates powerfully with Ann Laura Stoler's discussions of "imperial duress" and durability (Stoler 2013, 2016), though Stoler incriminates "duress" in a manner that departs from Todorova's neutral depiction of historical legacies. For Stoler (2016), racism, asymmetrical governance, and both psychic and material ruination are the key legacies of imperialism and colonialism, an inheritance that demands denunciation. Like Todorova, however, Stoler insists on expanding the purview on the past beyond the settlements of collective memory and its iterations: heritage (Gentry and Smith 2019), nostalgia (Boym 2001), and invented tradition (Hobsbawm 1983).

Stoler introduces another key theme that bolsters my inflection of the concept of legacy: a focus on the effects of occlusion, erasure, and "aphasia" (2016: 157) that imperial duress entails. As she writes, "Occlusion is neither an accidental byproduct of imperial formations nor merely a missed opportunity, rendered visible to a critical witness 'after the fact.' They are not just neglected, overlooked, or 'forgotten.' Occluded histories are part of what such geopolitical formations produce. They inhere in their conceptual, epistemic, and political architecture" (ibid.: 10). Knowledge of the past, whether framed as collective memory or historical fact (cf. Nora 1989), must grapple with the ways in which the past's legacies militate against knowledge. As Michel Rolph Trouillot (1996) has keenly argued, the production of historical knowledge is necessarily a process of

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8 Emphasis mine. I thank Pamela Ballinger for pointing me in the direction of this passage. Todorova's discussion of legacy here resonates with David Berliner's summation of and reflection on anthropological concern for "cultural transmission": "Describing the cultural phenomena of loss and transmission requires us above all to recognize that some concepts, practices, and emotions of the past are not automatically carried forward into the present, and to identify the lengthy processes by which they pass between generations and are appropriated by those who acquire them. To demonstrate this passing-on and its absence is to set a very complex scene; to pinpoint its *mediators*: actors, institutions, actions, interactions, places, ideologies, critical moments, smells, texts, silences, ordinary moments, sounds, emotions, objects, and technologies" (Berliner 2020: 14).

“silencing the past.”<sup>9</sup> Occlusion, amnesia (Walton 2019b), whitewashing (Jovanović 2019), and oblivion (Augé 2004) are not the antagonists of knowledge about the past, but its conditions. As such, a critique of collective memory must account for the silencing effects of historical legacies.

## Post-Empire

What is a post-empire? I adapt the term from Achille Mbembe’s now-classic interrogation of the postcolony (2001); the two concepts bear a family resemblance in a Wittgensteinian sense. The key principle of this resemblance is the synthesis of two previous notions, in Mbembe’s case “colony” and “post-colonialism,” “empire” and “post-imperialism” in my own. *On the Postcolony* opened new horizons in postcolonial critique by suggesting that the postcolony is a distinctive type of temporality and spatiality. Analogously, I propose that “post-empire” effectively captures the political, aesthetic, and discursive features of specific contexts in relation to characteristic dilemmas of post-imperial time and space. More precisely: ***a study of the aftermaths of bygone empires is a study of post-empires and their distinctive configurations of post-imperial collective memories and post-imperial legacies.***

Mbembe proposes that the postcolony is a mode of temporality, indeed, a temporal scandal, an entangled bricolage of times:

A number of relationships and a configuration of events—often visible and perceptible, sometimes diffuse, ‘hydra-headed,’ but to which contemporaries could testify since very aware of them. As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement* (ibid.: 14, emphasis in original).

In the postcolony—an “age” of temporal entanglement and displacement (ibid.: 15)—“time is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (ibid: 16, emphasis in original). For Mbembe, the entanglement and

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9 Trouillot elaborates: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (1996: 26, emphasis in original). See also Carol Kidron’s “Toward an Ethnography of Silence” (2009).

displacement of the postcolony—the temporality and spatiality that undergird the dilemmas of contemporary Africa—are principally effects of the universalizing trio of “modernity, rationalism, and Westernism” (ibid.: 10) and the disciplining power that it has on its Others, sub-Saharan Africans in particular.

In this respect, the post-empire differs from the postcolony, even as there are resonances and mutual reinforcements between them. Within the post-empire, particular imperial pasts exert an inordinate structuring effect on practices in the present and projections of the future. There is a duality to this weight of imperial pasts in the post-empire, a dichotomy of nostalgia and abnegation. Either the present prostrates itself before the precedent of the imperial past, or the present abjures the imperial past through a posture of rejection, rupture, and absolute distinction. Such are the dominant flavours of collective memory in the post-empire. Yet—to recapitulate—nostalgia and abnegation only capture the ways in which the present, through collective memories, configures the past in the post-empire. Whether their cultures of memory are rose-tinted or denunciatory, sites of post-empire also assemble a congeries of imperial legacies, the myriad ways in which the imperial past exerts pressure on the present.

Concomitantly, the study of post-empires is an inquiry into the formations, contradictions, and mutual entailments of post-imperial collective memories and post-imperial legacies. At each juncture, this project is a matter of situating silences, absences, and oclusions in relation to the visible, audible, and legible forms that post-empire takes. Collective memories also occlude the past, even as the past bequeaths other silences. In the dialectical tug between the force that the present exerts on the past and the force that the past exerts on the present, post-empires take on shape and substance in ways that are never innocent of the entanglements and dislocations—the duress—of multiple, layered times and the tribulations they continue to provoke.

## Toward the Study of Post-Empires

Having established the genealogical and conceptual field of post-empire, methodological dilemmas immediately rise to the fore. How to study a post-empire? In other words, how do collective memories of bygone empires achieve articulation, and how do these memories both register and occlude imperial legacies? The three-fold heuristic of *persons*, *places*, and *things* that I introduced above provides a compass for this inquiry, and yields three further, more specific questions. First, how and why do certain historical

personages come to embody collective memories of empires? How do these memories envelope and/or contradict the legacies of the individuals in question? Secondly, what processes produce specific places as sites of post-imperial memory? How, and why, are other places and spaces occluded? Third, how do bygone empires achieve contemporary embodiment through a variety of objects and material culture? What determines whether, and how, material legacies of empires achieve the status of imperial heritage, or, alternatively, become subject to ruination and desuetude?

For the remainder of the essay, I will explore these questions in greater detail with reference to the three post-empires that orient my ongoing research: the Habsburg, the Ottoman, and the Romanov. As befits a prolegomenon, my discussion aims to be suggestive, not decisive. In particular, I will highlight how the *personifications*, *emplacements*, and *materializations* of post-empires inhabit and articulate inter-imperial memories and legacies.

## Persons

On the banks of the Moscow River, a gargantuan statue of Tsar Peter the Great, erected in 1997, gazes northeast toward Saint Petersburg. Television and computer screens across the globe project the visages and voices of Halit Ergenç and Meryem Uzerli, the actors who portray Süleyman the Magnificent and his consort, Hürrem Sultan, on the wildly popular, Ottoman-themed Turkish serial, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (“Magnificent Century”) (Carney 2014). In Vienna, tourists queue to buy postcards, magnets, and miniature bottles of champagne featuring the image of the Austrian Empress Elisabeth, more familiarly known as Sissi.

Throughout the post-imperial lands of central and southeast Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East, collective memories of the Habsburgs, Ottomans and Romanovs are embodied by specific *persons* whose biographies shaped and were shaped by imperial history. In our era of proliferating mass and social media, collective memories of imperial lives have taken on unanticipated forms. Texts and images about royals, diplomats, military heroes, and resisters are no longer confined to traditional biographical genres and mediums—they are now available as downloadable e-books and circulating on Facebook and Instagram groups. Yet, with a few exceptions (e.g. Hametz, Schlipphacke, and Meyer 2018), this exuberant field of production—mass-mediated collective memories of imperial lives—has yet to attract scholarly attention. Three distinct types of imperial figures exert exceptional, centripetal force on post-imperial memories: *rulers*, *rebels*, and *consorts*.



**Rulers.** Unsurprisingly, Kaisers, sultans and tsars are among the most recognizable individual personifications of empires. Their names roll easily off of the tongues of imperial enthusiasts: Franz Josef, Süleyman the Magnificent, and Peter the Great; Maria Theresa, Mehmed II, and Catherine the Great; Joseph II, Abdülhamit II, and Nicholas II. While one could certainly list others, collective memories of these titans envelope and integrate those of other Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov rulers. A key, specific question in relation to bygone potentates is how collective memories of imperial rulers resonate with images of and debates over contemporary leaders in post-imperial contexts, such as Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russia’s Vladimir Putin. Conversely, the legacies of imperial governance that these figures advocated and embodied also persist in subtle ways. The domestication of legacies of rule within hegemonic images of former imperial rulers—occasionally smooth, occasionally tense—is a prominent, constitutive feature of post-empires.

**Rebels.** Imprisoned in the fortress of Theresienstadt following his assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Gavrilo Princip legendarily penned chilling, premonitory words on the walls of his cell: “Our shadows will walk through Vienna, wander the court, frighten the lords” (Miller 2014). In post-Habsburg, post-Ottoman, and post-Romanov contexts, imperial memories are not only a matter of nostalgia for the pomp and circumstance of the court or the virility of military victories. This is especially so in nation-states that have defined themselves in sharp contrast to the empires that preceded them. Post-empires are littered with the memories and legacies of individuals who are understood to bear responsibility for imperial dissolution. For the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, two figures immediately assert themselves: Princip and Vladimir Lenin. For the Ottomans, the situation is rather different—while would-be assassins and revolution-



Figure One: Personifications of Post-Empire. Peter the Great rises on the Moscow River, his gaze directed northeast toward St. Petersburg. The 98-meter-tall monument was erected in 1997 (photograph by author).

aries proliferated in the late Ottoman era, the figure who most clearly embodies the end of the Empire was a highly-ranked Ottoman soldier himself, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (see Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006). A host of other secondary figures—for instance, Guglielmo Oberdan, the failed assassin of Franz Josef; Rasputin, the fork-tongued consort of Tsarina Alexandra; and Muhammad Ali (Kavalalı Mehmet Ali Paşa), the rebellious Ottoman governor of Egypt who was born in modern-day Greece—belongs to this rogues' gallery. To the degree that these rebels are sites of memory, they are also sites of resistance to the hegemonic discourses and images of post-empires.

**Consorts.** In distinct but comparable ways, the Habsburgs, Ottomans and Romanovs upheld deeply patriarchal systems of rule. Although the Habsburgs and Romanovs allowed for the possibility of an heiress to the throne,<sup>10</sup> and several of their most effective rulers—Maria Theresa, Catherine the Great—were women, the fundamental principle of succession in each empire was based on male primogeniture. The Ottoman system was less clear-cut, and often resulted in fratricide as princes jockeyed for the throne, but the masculinity of rule was beyond question. It is striking, then, that vivid collective memories of each of the empires have attached to women who were wed to the throne but did not wield its power directly: Empress Elisabeth (Sissi), the wife of Franz Josef; Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana) the favoured courtesan of Süleyman the Magnificent; and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, Tsar Nicholas II's beloved. The afterlives of these consorts suggest a potentially fertile field of study: the gender(ing) of collective memory in post-empires.

## Places

Above the Bosphorus, a towering new mosque rises on Çamlıca Hill, a replica of Mimar Sinan's celebrated Ottoman houses of worship. On the Black Sea, a monumental staircase descends toward the water, calling to mind both an aborted naval mutiny against the Romanov Empire and Sergei Eisenstein's iconic Soviet-era film that commemorated the revolt. In the Balkans, a Habsburg-era museum is a study in architectural and temporal delirium: A picturesque early 20th Century Renaissance Revival building encloses an entire "traditional" Bosnian merchant home, a *konak*, from the late 18th or early 19th Century (Hartmuth 2012).

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10 Following the death of Catherine the Great in 1796, her successor and estranged son Paul I spearheaded a law of succession that henceforth barred women from the Russian throne (Kochan and Abram 1983: 148).

Post-imperial memories and post-imperial legacies are spatialized in myriad, differential ways. What processes produce specific places as sites of post-imperial memory, while silencing the legacies of others? Elsewhere, I have pioneered the concept of “textured historicity”—“the distinctive, embodied encounter between the subject in the present and the objects that convey the past in the present” (Walton 2019b, 357; see also Benjamin 1968)—in pursuit of this question. Delineating the textured historicity of the places that act as crucibles for post-imperial collective memories is a central task for the study of post-empires. Three specific types of places orient this inquiry: former imperial *centres*, former imperial *ports*, and former imperial *frontiers*.

**Centres.** Bygone empires remain remarkably present in their former seats of power. Vienna, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg are replete with reminders of their former glory, ranging from architectural gems to mass-produced guidebooks. Centres, however, did not always hold. Frequently, they shifted, and occasionally even split. Post-Habsburg memories are also vivid in Budapest, the co-capital of the Dual Monarchy after 1868; the cities of Bursa and Edirne were earlier Ottoman capitals, while Ankara succeeded Istanbul as the post-Ottoman seat of government; as both a predecessor of and successor to Romanov imperial might, Moscow was continuously a constitutive Other for St. Petersburg. An inquiry into post-empires must therefore take into account both bygone imperial centres and the cities that were the competitors, antecedents, and heirs.

**Ports.** In tandem with scholarship on globalization broadly, studies of port cities have crested in recent decades, with particular attention devoted to the “dynamic landscapes” (Hein 2011) and distinctive forms of sociocultural plurality that port cities articulate and inculcate. Imperial historians have directed attention to the key roles that entrepôts played within and between empires as the conduits that channelled people, goods, and ideas to and from imperial centres, provinces, and hinterlands (e.g. Keyder, Özveren and Quataert 1993; Tabak 2009; Fuhrmann 2020). Port cities are also preeminent sites for imperial nostalgia (Ballinger 2003), even as images of empire take on distinct colours and textures in contexts of such fluctuation and mobility. In a parallel fashion, port cities such as Rijeka and Trieste, Thessaloniki and Izmir, and Odessa and Baku are repositories for imperial legacies the cannot be found the former imperial capitals.

**Frontiers.** The age of nation-states has entailed the naturalization and universalization of the spatiality of borders. Borders are taken to demarcate political and cultural communities, defining a zero-sum image of membership and a concept of national space that ostensibly corresponds exactly to the national community. Such a relationship between space and political belonging was foreign to empires, which were defined far more by frontiers than borders in the contemporary sense. Imperial frontiers were laboratories



Figure Two: Emplacements of Post-Empire. A replica of an Ottoman merchant family's interior quarters in Sarajevo's Zemaljski Museum (the National Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina) (photograph by author).

for “inter-imperial” (Doyle 2014) interaction and imagination (Gingrich 1998; Sabatos 2020), as well as antagonism and war. Erstwhile imperial frontiers are equally productive laboratories for an array of post-imperial memories in relation to the inter-imperial past. The Balkans remain overdetermined by centuries of interactions across the Habsburg-Ottoman frontier, while the Caucasus evince a similar relationship to the Romanov-Ottoman (as well as Persian) inter-imperial past. Ukrainian Galicia still bears the imprint of Austro-Russian rivalries, while a variety of former frontier regions in Romania—the Carpathians, the Banat, and Bukovina—are inter-imperial legacies in their own right.

## Things

The belfry of one of the towers of Vienna's Stephansdom cathedral houses a fascinating imperial object: a gigantic bell, *Pummerin*, that was originally cast from iron reclaimed from Turkish cannons captured during the second Ottoman siege of the city in 1683. In addition to Lego figurines such as “Orc Shaman” and “German Nurse”, a website called

“Brick Warrior” sells a miniature Peter the Great for a mere fifty dollars (one can also purchase a Lego scimitar, “one of our more exotic swords ... (which) originated during the Ottoman Empire”).<sup>11</sup> On the margins of a cornfield in southwestern Hungary, two gigantic busts, a Sultan and a Count, stare ahead stoically, anchoring the “Hungarian-Turkish Friendship Park” (Walton 2019c).

Post-empires are not only highly personalized and spatialized—they also reside in *things*. Precisely because of their tangibility, things are treated as legacies par excellence, while their recruitment to the narratives of post-empires makes them the fodder for collective memory. Post-imperial memories and legacies reside overwhelmingly in three specific types of things: *relics*, *commodities*, and *memorials*. More panoramically, a focus on materializations of post-empire draws key lessons from the recent “turn to materiality” in the humanities and social sciences (Miller 1987; Bennett 2010), which insists that materials are simultaneously the “stuff” (Miller 2009) of culture and irreducible it.

*Relics*. As predominant sites for the production of authoritative narratives about the past in general, museums offer a privileged perspective on dominant cultures of memory (Vergo 1989). The collections of historical museums establish an “indexical” (Peirce 1992) relationship between objects exhibited in the present and times past—museum pieces, whether carefully arranged



Figure Three: Materializations of Post-Empire. Miniature statuettes of Sissi (Empress Elisabeth) on sale at the Hofburg, Vienna (photograph by author).

11 See <https://www.brickwarriors.com/peter-the-great/> (accessed online, 8 October 2021).

behind the vitrines of display cases or stored out-of-sight in the warehouses that contain most of any given museum's collection, are understood to be relics of previous moments and epochs, tangible legacies of the past. Museums that curate imperial history have an additional function, as well: Through the objectification and presentation of imperial relics, they enact a "break" between imperial and national time (Kezer 2000). Each of the former imperial centres of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov Empires houses an iconic imperial museum: the Hofburg in Vienna, Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, and the Hermitage Museum (the Winter Palace) in St. Petersburg. In each museum, post-empire is coordinated and presented through the relics chosen to represent it. Simultaneously, as former imperial palaces, the Hofburg, Topkapı, and the Hermitage are imperial relics in their own right. The museification of imperial residences, from modest provincial *schlosser* to massive royal domiciles is a subfield of the study of post-empires. Former Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov territories offer many further provocative examples, including Miramare, Maximilian's former residence north of Trieste; Dolmabahçe, along the shores of the Bosphorus; and Tsarskoye Selo outside of St. Petersburg.

**Commodities.** In his famous dissection of commodity fetishism, Marx (1992) memorably called attention to the way in which commodification entails a transmutation of value in an object's movement from usability to exchangeability. Taking a cue from Marx, we might examine how post-imperial things undergo transformation and transmogrification through commodification. Three categories of commodities will orient our exploration: souvenirs, clothing, and food. Souvenirs—postcards, magnets, and the technicolour universe of other tchotchkes that occupy giftshops—constitute a fertile ground for collective memories of empire. As Susan Stewart writes, "The souvenir reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body" (1993: 137). Souvenirs thus allow for the privatized appropriation of post-empires on an individual basis. This is equally true of post-imperial clothing such as fezzes or the haute 19th century hunting attire offered by such retailers as *Kleider Manufaktur Habsburg*.<sup>12</sup> Post-imperial clothing often mediates between the categories of relics and commodities, as travelling exhibitions of Sissi's lustrous gowns illustrate. Finally, post-imperial food offers an opportunity to ingest the heritage of empires. Viennese torte (*Sachertorte*) and other cakes, Turkish coffee and haute neo-Ottoman cuisine, and Russian caviar and vodka are among the foodstuffs that reward analytical ingestion and digestion. Such gulping and imbibing require a focus on the imagery and discourses

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12 For reference, and an eyeful of "Habsburg" couture see <https://www.habsburg.co.at/en/> (accessed online, 18 June 2021).

that constitute food as “imperial” (Hametz 2014) in sites of culinary production and consumption.

**Memorials.** Monuments, memorial parks, cemeteries, statues—these are the places where time is bent to foster collective memory, “dominant sites of memory” in Nora’s evocative phrase (1989: 21). The former territories of the Habsburgs, Ottomans, and Romanovs are littered with memorials to a variety of epochs, events, and individuals. Many of these commemorative sites endeavour to establish a fixed, sanitized image of imperial glory, especially in the former seats of the empires. Monuments such as the Heldenberg Memorial to Habsburg rulers and military heroes north of Vienna, the Çanakkale Martyrs’ Memorial on the former World War I battlefield of Gallipoli (Gelibolu), Turkey, and the Kagul Obelisk in Tsarskoye Selo perform the labour of distilling imperial legacies into collective memories. Conversely, former provincial seats of empires are frequently loci for memorials and monuments that articulate nationalist “counter-memories” (Foucault 1977) to empire—for instance, the statue of Ban Josip Jelačić in Zagreb (Walton 2020b), the monument to Skenderbeg in Tirana, and the Chronicle of Georgia memorial in Tblisi. Although each of these memorials is “dominant” in its national context, they also unsettle the post-imperial collective memories that continue to radiate from former imperial centres.

### *Coda*

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. – Walter Benjamin (1968: 263)

Post-empires—assemblages of collective memories and historical legacies—epitomize Walter Benjamin’s notion of “constellations,” and invite what I have elsewhere called “constellational thinking” (Walton 2021). Seeking to grasp the constellations between our own era and empires past entails a delicate balancing act: between the drama of images and the thunder of silences; between the pull of memory and the push of legacy; between the imprint of the past and the mould of the present. It is indisputable that empires are not merely historical—they are profoundly memorable and impactful in the present. We have only arrived at the threshold of accounting for the constellation of meaning that constitutes post-imperial memories, legacies, and their distinctive personifications, emplacements, and materializations.

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