

BOOK REVIEWS

Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World. By Krishan Kumar. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xviii, 576 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. Maps. \$39.50, hard bound.
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This volume is part of a recent trend, which aims at the reevaluation of the role of empires in modern history. Kumar's focus is on imperial ideologies and their functioning in the age of nationalism; particularly on specific features of what he calls "imperial" or "messianic" nationalism of imperial peoples. Kumar's main concern is the outlook and attitudes of the ruling peoples during the period of actual imperial rule. By concentrating on the rulers rather than the subject peoples, Kumar wants to make a shift from "post-colonial" studies: from the confrontation between imperial center and periphery to mechanisms of engaging peripheral groups and ensuring their loyalty.

The first chapter, "The Idea of Empire," describes the main elements of imperial ideologies, with particular attention to their messianic character and to the ability of the rulers of empires "to suppress their own national or ethnic identities" (6). Kumar challenges Benedict Anderson's statement about "inner incompatibility of empire and nation," and does it in a way that adds important aspects to an argument that has been recently offered by other authors.

The second chapter deals with the Roman Empire as the source of the European idea of Empire. The following five chapters cover the Ottoman, Habsburg (the chapter includes both Spanish and Austrian branches), Russian and Soviet, and the British and French Empires. Kumar is thus clearly Eurocentric in his choice of cases.

The narrative is vivid, often witty, and offers many interesting insights. Usually Kumar is quite convincing in his argument that empires were managing the diversity of their subjects with success and their collapse was caused by external factors more than by internal tensions.

The epilogue shows how leading politicians in all former imperial metropolises recently started positive reevaluations of the imperial pasts of their countries. Kumar asks whether empire is truly over and the "age of empires" at an end, and concludes his highly entertaining book by saying that the nation-state has not yet occupied the central stage and may never do so (472–74).

The selection of secondary literature that Kumar relies upon is broad and usually careful. Here problems begin, however. Kumar uses only English language literature, which is a questionable strategy for dealing with such topic. His book, published in 2017, does not engage two important volumes published in English in 2014 and 2015. First, in his monumental *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, particularly Chapter 8, Jurgen Osterhammel writes about the persistence of empires, which is one of the central points of Kumar's argument. Second, the collective volume *Nationalizing Empires*, edited by Stefan Berger and Alexey Miller, looks at how empires were building nations in their core areas, and offers chapters devoted to all the cases discussed by Kumar. This volume argues that it is more accurate and enlightening that empires were building nations in their core areas instead of arguing, as Kumar does, that "most empires are constructed by particular people" (28) and that national integration, at least in the cases of France, Britain, and Spain preceded empire-building.

Stating that the concept of decolonization is usually not applied to the history of land-based empires (467), Kumar ignores the books *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great*

War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire by Joshua Sanborn (2014), which does exactly that, and *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* by Michael A. Reynolds (2011), which also discusses this issue, although without using the term “decolonization.”

Another problematic issue is that Kumar does not pay proper attention to rupture and change in the nature of imperial projects in the twentieth century when he argues that the Weimar Republic “gave way to the same German Empire” (143), or when he treats the Russian Empire and the USSR largely as continuum without paying proper attention to the fact that it was exactly the mechanisms of center-periphery relations that had undergone a radical change in the Soviet Empire.

Engaging this literature would have given Kumar more “dialog space” and allowed him to develop and sharpen his argument. But it doesn’t change the fact that this book is an important contribution to the new trend in the history of empires, and should become part of the reading list in many advanced courses in modern history.

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The Future of the Past: New Perspectives on Ukrainian History. Ed. Serhii Plokhy. Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2016. x, 516 pp. Notes. Index. Maps. \$29.95, paper.
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In 1995, the *Slavic Review* published the already classical yet still provocative article “Does Ukraine Have a History?” by Mark von Hagen, who then taught at Columbia University (*Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 [Fall 1995]: 658–73). Professor von Hagen suggested several criteria for a historical field to be a legitimate academic enterprise. At the most general level, to satisfy the demand of academic legitimacy, a field of study, in our case the History of Ukraine, should boast “a written record of that experienced past that commands some widespread acceptance and authority in the international scholarly and political communities” (658). More particularly, in order for Ukraine “to have a history” in the eyes of outsiders, the subject of Ukrainian history should be present as a distinct field of studies in western academia; its practitioners should be non-Ukrainians (at least a significant number of them); a history of Ukraine should reflect Ukraine’s historic diversity, fluidity of identities, and cultural permeability (667); and finally, the perceived “weaknesses” of Ukrainian history should be reinterpreted as its “strengths” (such as “the fluidity of frontiers, the permeability of cultures, [and] the historic multi-ethnic society”). If and when these conditions are met, Ukrainian history will then become “a very modern field of inquiry” and “a veritable laboratory for viewing several processes of state and nation building and for comparative history generally” (672).

The Future of the Past: New Perspectives on Ukrainian History, edited by Serhii Plokhy, provides strong evidence that during the last two decades von Hagen’s main expectations have been largely realized. The volume is a product of several meetings of historians, but primarily the one that took place at Harvard University in October 2013. It comprehensively showcases all the most important historical issues and historiographical debates in the broadly-defined field of Ukrainian history. According to the volume’s editor Serhii Plokhy, Professor of History at Harvard, the final product reflects “the state of Ukrainian historiography in light of its multiple and often