This term, we concentrated on our public engagement programme, alongside our on-going research, writing, and teaching activities. We were delighted to welcome our final visiting fellow, the celebrated children’s author and illustrator Francesca Sanna, at Birkbeck. With Francesca we considered the possibilities and limitations of children’s books as a vehicle for thinking about the history of internationalism. At a well-attended workshop we debated potential forms of collaboration between academic researchers and children’s authors and illustrators, and are now planning a follow-up event to take place in June. We also explored potential historical settings for Francesca’s current book project, and accompanied her as she conducted classes at a number of London primary schools.

A second branch of activities concerned our collaboration with the Historical Association on a Teaching Fellowship on Cold War history, entitled “The Cold War in the Classroom”. At an intense residential at Birkbeck, and during an eight week course of online readings and discussions, our ten teaching fellows impressed us enormously with their commitment to enriching their subject knowledge. For now, we look forward to our final academic conference on Languages of Internationalism, to take place 24-26 May, along with a frantic rush to bring the Reluctant Internationalists project to completion by the autumn of 2017.

Visiting Fellow: Francesca Sanna

One of the joys of having a ‘public engagement’ visiting fellow in our research group is that we get to leave the safety and familiarity of our university offices and teaching rooms, and consider what our research looks like to those outside. Francesca Sanna was an ideal fellow to make us think about the contemporary relevance of our research findings, and to explore with us fruitful collaborations between authors/illustrators and historians.

Francesca’s first book, The Journey, narrates the path of a family
fleeing from war to safety abroad from the perspective of a young child. Her book has already received a number of prizes and awards, and has been nominated for many more, including the 2017 Klaus Flugge Prize, the longlist for the 2017 Kate Greenaway Medal, and the shortlist for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2017 - Illustrated Books.

Following the success of the workshop, we will organise a similar event in June. Further details of this will be available on our blog soon. The full workshop report can be read here.

In Conversation with Francesca Sanna

Siobhan Morris recently talked with Francesca Sanna about her path into illustration, her research with refugees in refugee camps across the Mediterranean, and her plans for the future. See here for the conversation in full.

School Workshops

We welcomed the opportunity to accompany Francesca Sanna as she conducted classes at a number of primary schools in London. Both teachers and pupils were eager to engage with the themes raised by Francesca's work - migration, war, travel, fear of the unknown, empathy with others. Francesca's workshops for Year 1 pupils developed themes of The Journey by getting the children to imagine embarking on a long and uncertain journey ahead, and deciding what to pack in their small suitcases. In some schools, such as Belham Primary School in Peckham, teachers had already worked with the children on The Journey and had asked them to write their own endings. Francesca also taught workshops on her current book project, where she and the pupils explored fears and worries while arriving in new and unfamiliar places. You can hear Francesca talk about The Journey as a teaching resource in Siobhan Morris' interview with Francesca.

Refugees and Children: Writing, Depicting and Exhibiting Refugee Stories for Children Workshop (3 March 2017 Birkbeck College)

Earlier this month, the Reluctant Internationalists held a one-day workshop on the process of researching, writing, exhibiting and book, Therapeutic Fascism: experiencing the violence of the Nazi New Order, at SSEES - UCL, 14 March 2017

Jessica Reinish took part in the symposium Citizens of the World: the International in British Politics since 1918, convened by Helen McCarthy, at Queen Mary University of London, 16-17 March 2017. She was chair and commentator of the panel "British Influence and Expertise in the Post-War Global Order"

Where you'll see us next

Dora Vargha will be contributing to the workshop 'Shame and Medicine' organised by Luna Dolezal (University of Exeter) and Barry Lyons (Trinity College Dublin) in Exeter, April 25 2017

Dora Vargha will be organising a workshop entitled Boundaries of Socialist Health at the University of Exeter, 1-2 June 2017

Jessica Reinish will take part in the workshop on Socialist Internationalism, convened by Dora Vargha, Exeter University, 1-2 June 2017

Jessica Reinish will present a paper at the workshop Making a Case for Interwar Internationalism, convened by Ilaria Scaglia, Freie Universität Berlin, 5-6 June 2017

Dora Vargha will present her work on epidemic narratives at the workshop 'Life Times: medical temporalities in conflict' at the University of Oslo on June 15 2017
depicting stories about refugees to children. The workshop brought together children’s authors, illustrators, publishers, museum professionals and academics to juxtapose different disciplines’ ways of depicting the stories of refugees for children. Discussions in four sessions explored how factual research, both historical and contemporary, can be interpreted for children. Following the success of the workshop, we will organise a similar event in June. Further details of this will be available on our website soon. The full workshop report can be read here.

Awards and Publications

Ana Antic has been awarded a British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award, for her project titled, ‘Children and Politics: violence, citizenship and re-education in the twentieth century’. Many congratulations, Ana!

Other Publications

Dora Vargha, ‘A Forgotten Episode of International Health’, History of Medicine in Ireland, a blog by the UCD Centre for the History of Medicine in Ireland, (March 2017)


For previous newsletters, see here.

We are pleased to announce that a selection of our podcasts are now available to download here. More will be added in the coming weeks.

Our Events This Term

Teaching Fellowship Programme: The Cold War in the Classroom

In January the Reluctant Internationalists hosted a residential course for the Historical Association’s 2017 Cold War in the Classroom Teaching Fellowship. Ten secondary school teachers from across the country have been appointed as this year’s Fellows following an extremely competitive application process. The fellowship is being co-taught by leading textbook author, trainer and examiner, Ben Walsh and Birkbeck historians.

The two-day residential course marked the first stage of the
Socialist Internationalism Workshop (23 February 2017 Birkbeck College)

In February, over twenty researchers gathered at Birkbeck to discuss the history of socialist internationalism during the Cold War, a field which has seen increasing scholarly interest over recent years and which has been of particular interest to the Reluctant Internationalists project. As Johanna Conterio (Birkbeck) explained in the introduction to the conference, recent historiography has complicated traditional images of the Cold War as a period of blocked mobility, revealing the extent of cooperation and exchange both behind and beyond the Iron Curtain. The conference aimed to discuss these patterns of mobility, promote dialogue between Soviet and East European historiographies, and explore the global dimensions of socialist exchange. A report of the workshop and discussions can be read on our blog.

Upcoming Events

Therapeutic Fascism: Experiencing the Violence of the Nazi New Order - Book Launch (19 May 2017 Birkbeck College)

In May we will launch Ana Antic’s new book, Therapeutic Fascism: Experiencing the Violence of the Nazi New Order. During World War Two, death and violence permeated all aspects of the everyday lives of ordinary people in Eastern Europe.

Throughout the region, the realities of mass murder and incarceration meant that people learnt to live with daily public hangings of civilian hostages and stumbled on corpses of their neighbours. Entire populations were drawn into fierce and uncompromising political and ideological conflicts, and many ended up being more than mere victims or observers: they
themselves became perpetrators or facilitators of violence, often to protect their own lives, but also to gain various benefits. Yugoslavia in particular saw a gradual culmination of a complex and brutal civil war, which ultimately killed more civilians than those killed by the foreign occupying armies.

Therapeutic Fascism tells a story of the tremendous impact of such pervasive and multi-layered political violence, and looks at ordinary citizens' attempts to negotiate these extraordinary wartime political pressures. It examines Yugoslav psychiatric documents as unique windows into this harrowing history, and provides an original perspective on the effects of wartime violence and occupation through the history of psychiatry, mental illness, and personal experience. Using previously unexplored resources, such as patients' case files, state and institutional archives, and the professional medical literature of the time, this volume explores the socio-cultural history of wartime through the eyes of (mainly lower-class) psychiatric patients. Ana Antic examines how the experiences of observing, suffering, and committing political violence affected the understanding of human psychology, pathology, and normality in wartime and post-war Balkans and Europe.

At the launch, Ana will introduce her book, followed by contributions and discussion from Professor Cathie Carmichael (University of East Anglia) and Professor Paul Betts (University of Oxford). The talk and discussion will be followed by a drinks reception. To reserve a place, please email reluctant.internationalists@gmail.com.

Languages of Internationalism (24-26 May 2017 Birkbeck College)

In collaboration with Brigid O’Keefe (Brooklyn College, CUNY) we will host our final conference in May 2017 on ‘Languages of Internationalism’. The conference will bring together, among others, historians, anthropologists, literary scholars and linguists. The goal of the conference is to shed light on the centrality of language to people’s past pursuit and experiences of internationalism. Historians must better understand the linguistic realities that their subjects confronted in their various global networks and endeavours. For any agents of internationalism,
language presented a wide variety of challenges and opportunities. It imposed obstacles and provided avenues to mutual understanding and collaboration among diverse peoples. The relative successes and failures of past internationalist projects in large measure owed to participants’ ability to effectively communicate across not just linguistic, but also political, cultural, economic, and professional boundaries. This fundamental and literal question of (mis)communication has dramatically shaped the lives of peoples variously confronting the global realities or pretensions of their milieus.

The conference programme is available here. The conference is open to all but spaces are strictly limited. More details on reserving a place are available here.

**Revolutionary Experiences: Transforming the Personal and Political in Wars against Fascism, 1936-1949 Workshop (6-7 July 2017 University of Exeter)**

This workshop, convened by Dr Ana Antic, University of Exeter, and Dr Carl-Henrik Bjerstrom, University of Leeds, aims to explore the intersections between the personal and the political in the experiences of antifascist fighters in the 1930s and 1940s. The mid-twentieth-century wars against fascism were profoundly transformative on multiple levels; they produced seismic social, political and economic changes throughout Europe, and in many cases they impacted forcefully on their participants’ political and cultural identities. Consequently, wartime experiences often led to radical personal transformations and left a lasting legacy on fighters’ personal trajectories.

In many ways, the achievement of such personal transformations was an integral part of the fight against fascism. In order to reach this fundamental goal, anti-fascist resistance movements across Europe launched mass campaigns of political education and cultural mobilisation and experimented with various forms of radical political participation. Thus, for many participants, the war was not only a military struggle but a complex experience through which they became conscious political subjects.

The workshop will engage with core aspects of these revolutionary experiences. We invite proposals for papers addressing one or more of the following questions: What practices of political participation did antifascist resistance movements develop and how did these differ across Europe? What strategies did they adopt to enable marginalised populations to enter the political sphere? How were ideological goals reflected in resistance organisations’ educational and cultural programmes, and how were these programmes shaped by the fact of mass participation? What did ideology and political concepts mean to grassroots participants in antifascist struggles, and how did their understanding of politics change as a result of the war? How did these wartime lessons in radical political citizenship shape veterans’ post-war lives and political participation?

Please send a 300-word abstract and a brief bio (including contact details and institutional affiliation) to a.antic@exeter.ac.uk and/or c.h.y.bjerstrom@leeds.ac.uk by 15 April 2017. More information is available here.