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Review of Isabella Löhr, *Globale Bildungsmobilität 1850–1930:
Von der Bekehrung der Welt zur globalen studentischen Gemeinschaft*

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ISABELLA LÖHR, *Globale Bildungsmobilität 1850–1930: Von der Bekehrung der Welt zur globalen studentischen Gemeinschaft*, Moderne europäische Geschichte, 21 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 413 pp. ISBN 978 3 835 35020 5. €42.00

In May 2023, the UK government announced that it would limit the right of foreign students to bring dependents into the country. In debates on ‘net migration’, university students had begun to attract scrutiny because of their inclusion in official immigration statistics. Pronouncements by Home Secretary Suella Braverman exemplified this conception of mobile students as migrants: addressing parliament, she attacked ‘unscrupulous education agents who may be supporting inappropriate applications to sell immigration not education.’¹ However, such language is only one element of the present-day discourse on student mobility. After all, both the Department for Education and university leaders regularly cast the large number of UK-based international students in more positive terms, viewing it as evidence for the appeal and competitiveness of the country’s higher education system. This is not just a matter of prestige, as income from international student fees is increasingly central to the financial survival of British universities. Moreover, some groups of mobile students have become the focus of very different efforts: in the wake of the Russian invasion of 2022, several organizations and institutions established schemes for Ukrainian refugee students, in some instances building on earlier ‘sanctuary scholarship’ programmes.

These contemporary examples highlight the multilayered nature of student mobility – a phenomenon that involves actions and responses by politicians, officials, educational institutions, civil society, and students themselves. Unsurprisingly, then, historical investigations of this subject easily reach beyond the history of higher education. Isabella Löhr’s empirically rich and analytically thorough study *Globale Bildungsmobilität* is an excellent case in point. Rather than concentrating on the responses of governments and university leaders or analysing the everyday experiences of students, her book examines

¹ Suella Braverman, ‘Immigration Update: Statement Made on 23 May 2023’, at [<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-05-23/hcws800>], accessed 23 June 2023.

how mobile students attracted the attention of Christian activists in the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. Through the prism of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) – an international organization founded in 1895 – she explores educational migration, cross-cultural encounters, varieties of Christian lay activism, and changing practices of humanitarian aid.

The main body of Löhr's monograph comprises three parts that make for a broadly chronological approach. Löhr first considers the WSCF's history in the context of changing patterns of student migration before 1914. A second section then traces the challenges for Protestant student activism during the First World War. The final part focuses on humanitarian ventures that originated with the WSCF and soon transcended its institutional frameworks. Taken together, these chapters make for a sophisticated study: Löhr adroitly shifts between different levels of investigation and theatres of action.

At one level, one can read this book as a story centred on the WSCF. Prior to 1914, the missionary impulses of its members led to an engagement with mobility in two major ways. On the one hand, WSCF representatives – especially from the United States and Britain, the two countries that played a central role within the federation – travelled abroad to spread their Christian message. On the other hand, the WSCF saw mobile students as a target audience and launched various welfare initiatives on their behalf, for instance by running halls of residence for Chinese students in both Japan and the United States. As was the case for other international organizations, the First World War drastically affected the WSCF, with 'war patriotism and national partisanship' posing an 'existential challenge' (p. 173) to its work. However, rather than halting its activities, the conflict led to a broadening of its field of action: national WSCF branches set up periodicals and mobile libraries for the troops, while the international organization launched educational endeavours among different groups, such as interned 'enemy aliens' and prisoners of war. The extension of WSCF activities reached new levels and dimensions after the war: in 1920, WSCF members launched a humanitarian venture, European Student Relief (ESR). ESR initially supported students suffering hardship in Central Europe, then undertook wide-ranging work in Russia and Ukraine, and ultimately adopted a global remit.

Löhr shows how in the early 1920s, a secular emphasis on students in need overshadowed the religious dimensions of the WSCF's work. In 1925, ESR turned into an entirely separate actor, International Student Service – and by this point the WSCF had begun to reconsider its own role in a changing world.

Löhr's study is more than an institutional account; it makes significant contributions to wider research debates in four major ways. The first concerns the nature and practice of internationalism. Historians such as Akira Iriye, Glenda Sluga, Patricia Clavin, Jessica Reinisch, and David Brydan have shown that internationalism involved a variety of activities and actors, which meant that efforts to forge international cooperation were highly variegated in terms of their substance, orientation, and direction.² In 2012, a pioneering volume edited by Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene traced different varieties of religious internationalism, and Löhr offers fresh insights into this phenomenon.³ Her book highlights the scale of Christian lay activism in the international realm, with the WSCF representing 200,000 students from forty national branches by 1919 (p. 72). The federation concentrated on a relatively select constituency – university students – yet it valued this target audience for its potential to shape future society. Crucially, the WSCF maintained a symbiotic relationship with two larger youth organizations, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). From this angle, Löhr shows how a particular form of Protestant internationalism evolved over time. During the 1920s, the WSCF interacted with the growing ecumenical movement, yet it also began to reflect more critically on the global dimensions of Christian activism, especially regarding its role in different cultural and colonial contexts.

The second research contribution of this monograph concerns the complex transition from war to peace. Löhr's work resonates with

² Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997); Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013); David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch (eds.), *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2021).

³ Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene (eds.), *Religious Internationalists in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750* (Basingstoke, 2012).

established research perspectives on the ‘long’ First World War, and she traces the impact of the myriad conflicts that continued or arose after the Armistice of November 1918.⁴ The Russian Civil War features prominently in Löhr’s book, yet her account reaches further. Reflecting her emphasis on student mobility, she considers students among the millions of people who were displaced by the conflicts and border redrawings after 1918. The book offers new material on this subject, for instance by considering ESR’s role in providing aid to refugee students. Moreover, the study shows how after the emergencies of the early 1920s, the transition to peace was reflected in a growing emphasis on a different form of student mobility – one that involved the promotion of exchanges, study trips, and scholarship programmes. To many activists, such undertakings were central to building a more peaceful future. As Löhr notes, ‘educational mobility increasingly became a cipher for international understanding’ in this period (p. 349).

Third, Löhr’s book makes a fresh contribution to the burgeoning research on humanitarianism. A vibrant scholarly literature treats the First World War and its aftermath as a transformative moment in the history of humanitarianism.⁵ Löhr’s analysis of ESR draws attention to a specific humanitarian actor that, apart from shorter accounts by Georgina Brewis and Benjamin Hartley, has barely been touched on by scholars.⁶ Löhr notes that between 1920 and 1925, ESR supported around 105,000 students from seventeen countries, reaching

⁴ See e.g. Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York, 2016).

⁵ See e.g. Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* (New York, 2013); Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Budapest’s Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Bloomington, IN, 2022); Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge, 2014); Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge, 2022).

⁶ Georgina Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and Beyond, 1890–1980* (New York, 2014), 41–66; Benjamin L. Hartley, ‘Saving Students: European Student Relief in the Aftermath of World War I’, *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 42/4 (2018), 295–315. See also my attempt to situate ESR alongside other currents of student-based internationalism: Daniel Laqua, ‘Student Activists and International Cooperation in a Changing World, 1919–60’, in Brydan and Reinisch (eds.), *Internationalists in European History*, 161–81.

an estimated fifth of the students in East-Central Europe (p. 213). By considering a particular case of humanitarian action, the book establishes students as a distinct category of aid recipients—a group whose members faced hunger and in some instances homelessness, being deprived of some of their usual livelihoods, at a time when universities themselves were experiencing ongoing turmoil. Given the scale of the problem, Löhr notes the ‘everyday overburdening’ (p. 211) of ESR employees and volunteers. Cooperation with larger organizations was central to ESR’s *modus operandi*. Accordingly, this monograph offers a broader perspective on humanitarian actors in the 1920s, tracing ESR’s relationships with, *inter alia*, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the American Relief Administration, and Britain’s Imperial War Relief Fund.

Löhr’s account highlights potential tensions between ESR’s internationalism and the national visions that characterized various British and US relief efforts. Moreover, Löhr unpicks some of the contradictions and unintended consequences of ESR’s humanitarianism. For instance, in determining which Russian students to prioritize in its aid provision, ESR ‘reproduced the state division of students into different categories’ (p. 247). Interactions with the Soviet authorities and ESR’s work in the contested border regions of Central and Eastern Europe both demonstrated that impartiality was far easier in organizational rhetoric than in humanitarian practice: on various occasions, ESR implicitly took sides, even if unconsciously. Moreover, with regard to ESR’s underpinning rationales, Löhr notes a duality or ‘false bottom’ (p. 298): the relief venture foregrounded secular concerns yet maintained close ties with the world of Protestant internationalism. While ESR did not emphasize Christian motivations, its humanitarian efforts provided Christian activists with a particular opportunity—namely, a growing presence in parts of Europe where Roman Catholic or Orthodox denominations were predominant.

The latter observation takes me to the fourth major aspect of this book, namely its qualities as a work of transnational history. Notwithstanding the decisive role of British and US activists (and funding) within the WSCF and ESR, the existence of branches and partners in different places rendered transnational cooperation intrinsic to these undertakings, as did the activists’ concern for those who had

crossed borders out of necessity or in search of opportunity. Löhr's subject matter means that activities in Central and Eastern Europe figure particularly prominently, but in ways that connect them to developments elsewhere. Moreover, the book clearly situates Europe and the United States within a global context. For instance, the study shows how the development of 'foyers' (p. 147) – as meeting spaces and dormitories – was an important feature of the WSCF's, YMCA's, and YWCA's repertoire in Asia, which helped to influence similar provision in Europe. Löhr also notes that in 1919, China's May Fourth Movement – in which students protested against imperialism – shaped debates within the WSCF, with its 1922 conference in Beijing addressing the theme of 'Christianity and International and Inter-racial Problems' (p. 345).

As my comments indicate, Löhr's book is a work of great substance, both in terms of its material and the insights that it offers. The research effort underpinning this monograph is formidable. Drawing on a rarely used source base, the author critically interrogates the accounts produced by the WSCF, ESR, and their interlocutors. Admittedly, the study is not always an easy read – at least when compared to academic history publishing in English. In this respect, the length, style, and composition arguably reflect the book's origins in a German habilitation thesis, and it therefore takes some time to work through the different points, observations, and angles that are provided here. Yet whoever dedicates their attention to this impressive study will be richly rewarded, as they will benefit from work that is well-grounded in the current research literature and, at the same time, highly original in its approach. In the conclusion to her monograph, Löhr acknowledges that she has adopted a 'bird's eye view' (p. 365). As a result, there is the potential to consider personal stories, making more room for individual experiences of, and resistance to, aspects of Christian internationalism. Adopting such an approach would make for a different kind of book – but one that could build on Löhr's pioneering work. Clearly, then, expeditions that start on 'the path to a global student community' (p. 261) can lead us on to new research avenues.

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