

Institution: SOAS

Unit of Assessment: 30 History

a. Context

SOAS historians have long prioritised external impact as part of their portfolio of activities. In a rapidly changing global environment, it is ever more critical that they continue to do so. External impact is certainly now regarded as important within the discipline, with increasing opportunities for historians to engage with a range of external users, to find new audiences for their work and to wield influence beyond the discipline itself. The discipline itself is changing as a result, and historians' unique skillsets are being brought to bear on a widening range of activities and issues beyond the confines of the academy

Over the period 2008-13 the Department of History at SOAS has sought to reach a wide range of non-academic user groups and audiences, both within the UK and internationally, including in our specialist regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It has done this by applying the insights gained through long-term historical research in three main spheres. First, SOAS historians have been engaged in the **creation and interpretation of cultural capital**, notably through the staging of exhibitions, the organisation of conferences of wide public interest and film screenings. This has included engagement with the British Library, the Barbican Centre and the National Maritime Museum, as well as events hosted within SOAS itself. Second, the department has sought to place itself at the forefront of the **enhancement of public understanding** of a range of issues related to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, both historical and contemporary. SOAS historians regularly appear on media outlets including BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera, and are routinely called upon to provide advice on television and radio programmes with both a fictional and non-fictional remit. Thirdly, we regard it as one of our principal responsibilities to **inform and influence public policy**. We achieve this through engagement with government departments, NGOs operating in the field and a variety of think-tanks and policy-centred institutions. In the census period, we have worked with, amongst others, Oxford Analytica, Chatham House, International Crisis Group, DFID, FCO, the British and US armies, the US State Department, the UN and numerous European foreign affairs departments. Such institutions and organisations have been increasingly interested in bringing to bear historical understanding on a range of current issues, especially in the Middle East and Africa. Some of our publications, indeed, reflect that interest.

As is common across the sector, not all historians in the department are focused on an external impact agenda, with individual scholarship remaining an important part of our mission. However, impact has been achieved in relation to the particular research clusters within the department: the urban environment in Africa and the Middle East; warfare, political violence and local and international security; the nature of authoritarianism and related human rights concerns; and economic performance and its wider social impact. Our impact agenda also extends to individuals in other Departments at SOAS who deal with historical topics or use historical methods.

b. Approach to impact

The department adopts a multi-pronged approach to engagement with external users, in recognition of the fact that historians need to be flexible in an increasingly crowded knowledge marketplace. Thus, SOAS historians have been engaged by a range of media organisations in need of expert commentary, in particular on North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and East and Southeast Asia. Media engagement also includes the world of film-making, a notable example being Gerteis' role as historical advisor on a motion picture, *47 Ronin*, starring Keanu Reeves, due for release in December 2013. Gerteis has also served as an advisor on the History Channel documentary *Mankind: The Story of Us All*. Similarly, Parker and Reid served as historical consultants on the high-profile BBC4 documentary series *The Lost Kingdoms of Africa*, while Hirschler undertook the same role on the BBC London radio drama *The Invasion: Arab Chronicles of the First Crusade*. Fortna was involved in the BBC4 series *Who Do You Think You Are?* and advised on a documentary about the Ottoman Empire. Such knowledge transfer activity has even reached into the world of gaming, with Gerteis providing advice to Nintendo on Samurai warriors.

Relationships with think-tanks and policy institutions have been a vital part of our role in knowledge transfer. Reid has long been involved in Chatham House's internationally-funded Horn of Africa programme, a relationship which resulted in a collection of essays published by Chatham

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House on Eritrea's foreign policy and its role in the region (2009). In addition to its London launch, meetings were held in Washington and New York to promote engagement with Eritrea. Chatham House provides an ideal setting for serendipitous exchange with a range of non-academic users: diplomats, obviously, but also civil society and religious leaders. Reid's engagement with International Crisis Group resulted in a major report on Eritrea (2010) and continues to provide expert opinion on the Horn of Africa for the consultancy and briefing organisation Oxford Analytica. In addition to these long-term relationships, SOAS historians have played critical roles in recent years in providing advice on particular issues, such as Rodet's consultancy with the US Army during the Mali crisis in 2012-13. Rodet and others – Reid, Fortna, Charney – regularly provide briefings on particular countries and regional issues to NGOs (Red Cross, *Medicins sans Frontieres*), governments (the Austrian Development Agency), international bodies such as the UN, and to diplomats in advance of their postings. Reid was called on to advise the US National Intelligence Council on Ethiopia in advance of the change to the Obama administration in 2008, and in 2011 and 2012 lectured at the UK Defence Ministry Joint Services Command and Staff College at Shrivenham on the Horn of Africa. The SOAS Department of History, in other words, is frequently the first port-of-call for diplomats, aid workers, policy advisors and military personnel in need of expert counsel on their particular areas of interest and concern. SOAS historians are also prominent in providing expert witness in cases involving asylum: relationships have been developed with legal firms which regularly handle such cases. Reid (Ethiopia and Eritrea) and Sadan (Burma) have been notable in this regard, while Reid was also involved in a Special Immigration Appeals Commission case which was of a national security nature.

Finally, SOAS academics regularly apply their expertise in the public arena through work in museum exhibitions and film screenings. In 2008, Clarence-Smith worked with the British Museum on a sensory history project, and between 2009 and 2012 with the British Library on a photographic exhibition on Islam, trade and politics across the Indian Ocean. Laaman has given public talks on Chinese history at the Barbican Centre in London and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. Reid is currently involved in an exhibition at the Brunei Gallery (SOAS) on David Livingstone, part of a series of 200th anniversary events around the UK, which launched in early November 2013.

In order to promote such engagement, a variety of incentives and forms of support are available to staff. Active engagement with non-academic bodies is supported and facilitated by the School's Research and Enterprise Office. SOAS also organises a range of externally-focused events that bring together academic researchers with non-academic users. An example of this was a one-day symposium in November 2013 to launch the David Livingstone exhibition in the School's Brunei Gallery. Also in 2013 Rodet organised a series of workshops on 'Slavery on Film' in London, bringing together scholars and film-makers. Between 2011 and 2013, Clarence-Smith organised a series of conferences at SOAS on the history of camels, donkeys and mules which proved popular attractions and involved non-academic participants. Up to sixty people attended, including many from the charity and NGO sectors, and a number of representatives from the private sector, including those involved in camel milk production in the Netherlands.

At both School and Faculty level, funding is available for colleagues who wish to organise workshops, conferences and other events at SOAS which have a wider impact component. Through internal peer review, we seek to provide support to researchers to develop strong impact plans at an early stage of writing of external grant proposals, in line also with the increasing emphasis of a range of funding bodies on impact.

c. Strategy and plans

The SOAS Vision and Strategy for its 2016 Centennial and beyond explicitly recognises external impact as an organisational priority and seeks to support and facilitate it. Within this favourable institutional context, and given the wide chronological and geographical range of research in the department, our focus is on developing an impact strategy that creates the enabling conditions for engagement with non-academic users. First, our goal is to ensure a clear process for the development of impact plans for individual research projects, including relevant advice from within and outside the department on how this might best be achieved. The aim is to ensure this is always included within internal peer review of research proposals prior to their submission to funding bodies. In practice, the formulation of plans for impact is now embedded within the great majority of external grants and the department and the School are keen to ensure that, where

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appropriate, achievable plans are incorporated into all research activity planning, whether internally or externally funded. Plans involve the specification of intended audiences, communication plans for the outputs of the research, funding for specific enhancement activity and a plan for evidence collection.

Building on this, our aim is to more actively support the promotion of impact as research projects unfold. Within larger projects, this should be costed into proposals from the outset, but it is also our intention at institutional level to seek to support impact more systematically, for example through the development of strategic partnerships with key external bodies, the careful scheduling of exhibitions and events to dovetail with research progress, and the facilitation of links with media outlets through our the School's communications division. In addition, we aim to develop a system to identify and track evidence of impact, both as a way of recording successes and in order to disseminate best practice. Although this work is also primarily being undertaken at an institutional level within the School's Research and Enterprise Office, the department is responsible for identifying project areas, specific pieces of work, events and opportunities and alerting the institution to them, as well as liaising with the REO as they evolve. The department will seek to develop this working relationship in the years to come.

A further dimension to our institutional strategy in relation to impact involves discussion of the incorporation of activity relating to impact into existing procedures for staff development, reward, promotion, probation and performance assessment. This is particularly important given the significance at present of impact that emerges from requests to staff (e.g. from media and government bodies) rather than the planning of impact strategies at Departmental level.

d. Relationship to case studies

Three impact case studies have been provided as part of this submission, which illustrate well the diversity of routes through which impact on non-academic research users is achieved by historical research in SOAS. These case studies demonstrate the significance of individual theoretical and in-depth empirical scholarship on specific policy debates and practices, and on public understanding of particular aspects of the past; but they also demonstrate the varying importance of serendipity, medium-term planning and systematic engagement with partners.

The first case study (Screech), demonstrates the far-reaching impact of individual scholarly endeavour that can arise in unexpected ways. Screech's work on Japanese history, art and culture has had an influence far beyond academia – an influence most clearly manifest in its impact on the work of the novelist David Mitchell, who has drawn extensively on Screech's scholarship on a range of subjects.

Second, the work of Achcar is a powerful illustration of the significance of individual research endeavour resulting from a high-impact monograph. Achcar's research on opposing Arab-Israeli narratives surrounding the Nazi Holocaust and the displacement of Palestinians during the establishment of the Israeli state led to a ground-breaking monograph, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: the Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (London: Saqi Books, 2010). The book, and several other articles on related themes, has led to a great deal of public debate and media attention. The book itself has been positively received, on the whole, but even those who disagree with Prof Achcar's findings recognise his work as being of seminal significance.

Finally, Reid's work on the contemporary Horn of Africa and its historical dynamics, with a particular focus on the neglected, misunderstood and troubled state of Eritrea, began as a scholarly research project focusing on *longue duree* history. Its implications for non-academic users derive from insights gleaned on the evolution of political culture, and the prevalence of militarism, and human rights, but also from Reid's systematic engagement with boundary partners such as Chatham House and International Crisis Group, and from his direct involvement in immigration appeal cases.