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**Review: Seventh Global History Student Conference, Berlin, June 30–July 2, 2023**  
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# **The Seventh Global History Student Conference, Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, June 30–July 2, 2023**

REVIEWED BY

**Somer Mengqing Zhang and Monalisha Mallik**

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWERS**

Somer Mengqing Zhang is pursuing her PhD at Georgetown University, focusing on Russian and Soviet history. In the context of global communism, she examines the transcultural experiences of Chinese revolutionaries in Moscow and beyond. Monalisha Mallik is a current Global History MA student at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research interests lie in gender history, borders, and migration.

The Seventh Annual Global History Student Conference was held in Berlin in the early summer of 2023. The student conference team received a myriad of submissions from twenty-five countries around the world, a testament to the international conference's popularity and reputation among young historians. Twenty-eight participants formed eight panels covering a wide range of topics: (inter)national politics, (un)free movement, advocacy and activism, gender history, historiography, media, encounters, and trade and commodities. Questions regarding sources, methodologies, problems, challenges, and possibilities in global history were raised and discussed among participants, as well as public audiences. The conference brought fresh perspectives and promising insights in shaping the way we perceive historical narratives. In this review, we delve into the key highlights of the intellectual tapestry woven over the course of three days.

### **Keynote lecture**

The conference began with a keynote lecture titled, "Silencing and Erasures in Global History," given by Dr. Sarah Bellows-Blakely, about her work related to a United Nations (UN) research project about girls' education in East Africa. In existing scholarship on economic programs which focus on girls from developing regions, Bellows-Blakely argued that some voices are treated as natural political actors and knowledge producers, whereas others are excluded. The Pan-African, women-run NGO, African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) was the main subject of her research. By disentangling the history of FEMNET and its complex relationship with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Bellows-Blakely unveiled how the historiographical and methodological erasure of African women was experienced within FEMNET. She further pointed out that the absence of this influential NGO in existing scholarship is a representative case of the erasing of specific actors in historiography. Bellows-Blakely's lecture encouraged historians to be more aware of such erasures. Listening to her sharing her work, we were reminded that working as a historian requires both expertise and courage—to always question the dominant narratives and seek voices that are made invisible and inaudible.

### **Panel discussion**

Several panelists embodied such attentiveness; the panelists discussed below contested the hidden or obvious praxis of erasure and silencing in history with their research projects.

Derya Bozat, a student at the University of Bern, examined the experiences of Sub-Saharan African students in the Soviet Union, an under-

studied group in the historiography of the Cold War. As decolonization movements created new possibilities for the new countries in Asia and Africa, collaboration between the Soviet Union and African countries increased. One group of people directly affected by such Soviet offers of collaboration were students from newly independent African nations. With little research conducted on such non-Western interrelationships, Bozat filled this gap by focusing on the experiences of young African students in Moscow—that their encounters with Soviet students and local citizens were characterized by discrimination based on their racial features, including verbal and physical violence from Soviet male students. Nonetheless, these African students also built remarkable friendships with more open-minded Soviet female students. The difficulties faced by African students in navigating both the Soviet Union and the politically and racially laden concept of “Soviet Friendship,” gave insight into the broader diplomatic entanglements between the Soviet Union and newly independent African countries.

Following the theme of international exchanges, Cui Feng of the National University in Singapore sought to trace the history of a little-known communist movement in Southeast Asia—the Communist Party of Siam (CPS) in Thailand. In the early 20th century, Siam was one of few Southeast Asian countries that escaped Western colonization, which provided a safe space for Asian activists to engage in transnational communist movements. Chinese and Vietnamese Communists were key members of the CPS, and the working languages among them were primarily Chinese and Vietnamese. Cui utilized not just primary sources written in Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian, but also secondary sources in Thai. To provide a more thorough picture of the founding and evolution of this less well-known, yet historically significant communist group, Cui conducted several oral history interviews with previous CPS members. By including biographical sources in his research, Cui convincingly illustrated how the ethnic Siamese were nearly absent from the communist movement, with foreigners playing the dominant role. He revealed that the local Siamese, including migrant workers from China or Vietnam, had little interest in political activities and communist ideology. Their indifference to the work of the CPS added to the “alienness” of this imported revolutionary party. It was interesting to see how Cui used oral interviews and biographies to make visible both active CPS members and the overlooked local Siamese people in his research.

Casting doubt on the most easily accessible primary sources is a constructive practice for global historians. Like Cui, whose research topic suffered from heavily one-sided sources, Maria Bowling, a student at the Sorbonne in Paris, also conducted oral history interviews. Her interviewees were leaders of several Angolan nationalist groups active in the independence movements

of the 1960s and 1970s. Bowling explored the erasure of defeated groups in revolutionary struggles, questioning the victor’s narrative. Using the framework of state-making during global decolonization, she examined the beginning of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola’s (MPLA) diplomatic militancy and its step-by-step construction of sovereignty. Being self-reflective about the methodological nationalism that restricted existing scholarship and her initial research scope, Bowling came to an important realization. Except for the victorious MPLA, other resistance groups that fought for independence within Angola, yet were less involved in international affairs, have mostly been excluded from the official history of Angola and the existing historiography on the Angolan independence movements. Members of the MPLA were present in international organizations such as the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) since the early stages of the MPLA’s state-making endeavor, and such participation was crucial for Angola’s independence. By studying the independence-makers’ practices abroad, Bowling concluded that the MPLA leaders’ repeated presence in those essentially exclusive spaces, such as the UN, largely contributed to their ultimate success in gaining diplomatic recognition of their independence and eventually obtaining sovereignty domestically.

Another examination of the close interrelationships between domestic and international institutions came from Nelly Ating of Cardiff University. Using the photograph archive of Amnesty International, a human rights organization from the United Kingdom as their main source, she explored Amnesty’s engagement in the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa from the 1960s to 1990s. Highlighting emotional and geographical borders in the visual sources, Ating highlighted easily neglected aspects of institutional photographic archives—the activists’ desires, aspirations, and lived realities. These particular South African sensibilities were documented in those photos, which portrayed not only the violation of human rights but also intimate lived stories under Apartheid. As a global historian, she constantly questioned the agency behind history: a global history by whom and for whom? Who or what is visible? Who has the agency and ownership of what?

Pratika Rizki Dewi of Glasgow University focused their work on issues related to (in)visibility and silencing in the historiography of the independence movement in Indonesia, specifically regarding marginalized female politicians and activists. Dewi employed Deniz Kandiyoti’s framework of “patriarchal bargaining” to show women’s strategies in the face of cultural and social essentials of the patriarchal system and the encounter, contestation, and adaptation between men and women in terms of resources, rights, and responsibilities. In contrast to the Western notions’ restrictions that emphasized more antagonist relationships between male and female activists,

Dewi portrayed a different experience of female activism. In 1950s Indonesia, a group of Indonesian women utilized the health movement as a political weapon to challenge patriarchy. Doctor Hurustiati Subandrio, for example, based on Dewi's archival research, was the Indonesian representative and the most impactful voice during the Asia-Africa Women's Conference in 1958. Subandrio shared struggles and experiences of Indonesian women's movements for maternal and children's health. Her work and words not only gained local recognition but also inspired the health movement and women's movement globally.

Differing from other panelists whose subjects were primarily individuals or institutions, Francisco Lopez Vallejo of the University of Bayreuth focused on the rise and fall of a city in Mexico named Papantla. This little-known place was once an essential hub of the global vanilla market from the late 19th to the early 20th century. However, with the globalization of vanilla, Papantla was gradually excluded from the expanding vanilla economy. Vallejo illustrated how the globalization of a commodity such as vanilla could dramatically reshape a small city's local economy and society. He demonstrated how violence played an important role in the vanilla economy, which revealed the dark side of global economic history when profit is the determinant of development. Moreover, as the Mexican state grew into the connecting actor between local and international networks since the 1970s, state policies largely contributed to the violent land seizure and the further deterioration of the status of vanilla farmers, who were economically vulnerable and unjustly treated in the globalized market. Vallejo's research made visible the forgotten city of Papantla and the lives of those local small farmers who were subjected to violence resulting from the globalized economy of vanilla.

## **Student salon**

In addition to the intellectual exchange of student research projects, the conference acknowledged the importance of inclusion and equality in academia. During the student salon, participants discussed unconventional topics such as student unity, the challenges of academic work, struggles with accessing sources, and the vital practice of self-care. To improve students' overall learning and research experiences at the university level, the participants agreed that forming a supportive student-based community is necessary. Providing a safe space to express students' concerns about sexual harassment, racist and sexist discrimination, and mental health would be a crucial first step to encourage young scholars to pursue further academic goals.

## Final discussion

Closing the 2023 conference was a final discussion with panel chairs and panelists where they had the opportunity to reflect on the different approaches to studying global history. Participants discussed their engagement with global history in American, British, German, and Chinese academic environments to shed light on the discipline's worldwide reach and adaptability. The discussion also covered academics' professional and emotional difficulties during their scholarly investigations and the general challenges of working in academia, as previously touched upon during the student salon.

As global history students and reviewers, this was our first time participating in the seven-year-old Global History Student Conference. Like many participants and audience members, we appreciated this international event that combined academic discourses and more casual in-person interactions. With the practice of listening harder and exchanging thoughts respectfully and constructively, we believed that our shared project of unearthing the silenced and erased voices in history would be less overwhelming and more empowering to all subjects involved. This conference offered a multitude of learning opportunities, from the personal to the professional, and the chance to form networks, partnerships, and valuable contacts for future endeavors. All of this will prove fruitful for young researchers looking towards their next chapter.