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Introduction: Historical geographies of internationalism, 1900–1950

Jake Hodder *, Stephen Legg, Mike Heffernan

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to a special issue on historical geographies of internationalism begins by situating the essays that follow in relation to the on-going refugee crisis in Europe and beyond. This crisis has revealed, once again, both the challenges and the potential of internationalism as a form of political consciousness and the international as a scale of political action. Recent work has sought to re-conceptualise internationalism as the most urgent scale at which governance, political activity and resistance must operate when confronting the larger environmental, economic, and strategic challenges of the twenty-first century. Although geographers have only made a modest contribution to this work, we argue that they have a significant role to play. The essays in this special issue suggest several ways in which a geographical perspective can contribute to rethinking the international: by examining spaces and sites not previously considered in internationalist histories; by considering the relationship between the abstractions of internationalism and the geographical and historical specificities of its performance; and by analysing the interlocking of internationalism with other political projects. We identify, towards the end of this essay, seven ways that internationalism might be reconsidered geographically in future research through; its spatialities and temporalities; the role of newly independent states; science and research; identity politics; and with reference to its performative and visual dimensions.

As we write this introduction, in early September 2015, an international crisis of historic proportions is playing out along the borders and within the transport networks of 'fortress Europe'. Like many international crises, this one was foretold, and largely ignored. Almost a year ago, in November 2014, Pope Francis addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg, chastising its members for turning their backs on the thousands of men, women and children, many fleeing war-torn regions of the Middle East and North Africa, seeking refuge in Europe. Francis expressed particular concern that the European Union had allowed the Mediterranean, Rome's *mare nostrum*, "to become a vast graveyard" for the thousands who had already drowned attempting to reach the shores of Italy and Greece.[1] Since then the crisis has steadily worsened and as we write today the numbers of refugees seeking sanctuary in Europe has reached levels not witnessed since the end of the Second World War.

Media representations have ranged from the earnestly sympathetic to the callously indifferent, the latter exemplified, with a certain sad inevitability, by Britain's *Daily Mail* which carried an article in May 2015 under the headline "How many more can Kos take?", a surreal commentary, presented without a trace of irony, about the difficulties facing British holidaymakers on the Greek island whose enjoyment had been spoiled by "thousands of boat people from Syria and Afghanistan". The subheading read: "Summer break labelled a 'nightmare' by British holidaymakers, who won't be coming back if it's a refugee camp next year".[2] Thankfully, more responsible news agencies have provided powerful critiques of the humiliating treatment refugees have received in makeshift encampments at border towns and train stations from Calais to Budapest.

In the past few days, the self-assured realism of this 'keep-out' rhetoric has been confronted and partially challenged by a brutal photo-aesthetics that has encapsulated, more effectively than words, the terrible plight of refugees. The disturbing image of a Hungarian lorry, abandoned by people traffickers on an Austrian motorway with the bodies of 71 suffocated migrants inside was compounded by a heart-rending photograph of a Turkish policeman tenderly retrieving the lifeless body of a three-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, still in his smartest clothes and shoes, from the gently lapping waves on a beach near the popular resort of Bodrum.[3] This latter image, which has provoked widespread discussion

* Corresponding author. School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Sir Clive Granger Building, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK. Tel.: +4401158468402; Fax: +44 (0)115 95 15249.
E-mail address: jake.hodder@nottingham.ac.uk (J. Hodder).

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about the exploitation-after-life of Alan's image, went viral almost immediately under the hash-tag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik ("humanity washed ashore"), accompanied by a line from the poem 'Home' by the British-Somali Warsan Shire: "no one puts their children in a boat, unless the water is safer than the land".[4]

Shire's poem highlights the elemental geography of this crisis – the violence of sea versus the violence of land – and hints at the more complex geographies of wars and uprisings that provide the explanatory framework within which this crisis has unfolded: the geographies of the 'Arab Spring' and its irresolution in many countries; the connections, geographical and historical, between these events and the earlier invasions by the United States and its allies of Afghanistan after September 2001 and of Iraq two years later; or the postcolonial geographies of Bangladesh and its Rohingya refugees. Underlying the apprehension of these geographies is a need to rethink scale: at what scale should we comprehend these human dramas? What *is* it that is moving? What is the scalar *object* of this crisis – a population, an ethnicity, a community, a family, a child, a *subject*?

In addressing these questions a historical framing of the crisis is essential. Understanding the historical linage of these crises such as those displaced *within* Europe during and after the Second World War to the League of Nations' Committee for Refugees, established in 1921 to assist the 1.5 million people who had fled the Russian Revolution, is both vital to understanding our contemporary moment, but also to understanding the formations of 'the international' as a social and political idea. In the near-century since the League's founding, the world has experienced de-colonisation, the Cold War, neo-imperialism, rampant globalisation, and the rise of the 'BRIC' geo-economies, yet many of the challenges of internationalism remain troublingly familiar – revealed so starkly by the on-going crisis in the Middle East and Africa.

Whilst this is unquestionably an *international* crisis, one is particularly struck by the inadequacy of writings on internationalism to provide a satisfying analytical lens to comprehend its diverse meanings and responses. With some exceptions, accounts of internationalism remain overly procedural and technocratic: detailing how an international machinery of leagues and institutions relate to one another in terms of legal jurisdiction, electoral mandate, etc. This is reinforced by how the international is often framed in popular discourse as a bureaucratic scale or extension of the nation state. To some extent this reflects how "internationalist" ideas emerged out of dissatisfaction with the emotional registers of patriotism, nationalism and jingoism. Yet it points to an important gap in our understanding of how everyday people, in everyday places, through routine and everyday acts have a powerful sympathetic and emotive understanding of internationalism, and invest the international with a global sense of duty, hospitality and openness. The refugee crisis, if read through nationalist media commentaries or the reaction of the United Nations or European Union alone, seems to demonstrate both the crippling failure of the 'international community' to respond in any kind of coherent, decisive or passionate way, and also a tragic failing of internationalism more generally as a cultural, historical and political idea.

Yet, anyone who witnessed coverage of the first refugees being applauded with water and food on the platforms of Munich's central station, the "refugees welcome" vigils across Europe, or the 70,000 petition signatures requesting that the BBC refer to these events as a "refugee crisis" rather than a "migrant crisis" must be struck by the extraordinary display of support and solidarity among millions of Europeans.[5] This, in many quarters, seemed at odds with their own governments' ill-chosen representations of the crisis. This included, for example, the British Prime Minister David Cameron's infamous channelling of a tried and tested colonial discourse of "counter-insurgency" (Guha, 1983) in describing the migrants as a "swarm" or the British Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond's, previous claims that African migrants to the UK were threatening the country's standard of living.[6] Whilst the essays in this special issue do not address the refugee crisis directly, the on-going context of events in Europe and beyond starkly reveal both the urgent need for a more effective international solution, and the incredible difficulty in finding one; both the promise and problem of internationalism. The essays do not seek to provide an exhaustive historical account of internationalism, but rather they collectively examine a wider array of sites, people, and politics than is often considered when addressing internationalist thought and practice. Broadening the field of enquiry to settings and groups commonly overlooked, like many of the people now calling on their governments to open their borders to refugees, we argue is critically important to understanding the international crises of our own age.

Why historical geographies of internationalism?

Across the arts, humanities, and political and social sciences there has been a re-engagement with the international as a concept, a scale, and a political and cultural affiliation. This has been founded on a shared agenda to re-think the potential of the international as the most urgent scale at which governance, political activity and resistance must operate when confronting the larger environmental, economic, and strategic challenges of the twenty-first century. Despite their global reach and ambitions, geographers have as yet made only modest contributions to this re-conceptualisation of the international. Geography's puzzling silence in this regard suggests that the discipline is still too narrowly constrained by national contexts and frameworks that have proved surprisingly resistant to internationalism, or perhaps more accurately geographers have a slight unease about the kind of hegemonic internationalism that increasingly characterises the discipline. The growing significance of national (and particularly Anglo-American) geographical conferences, specifically the annual conferences of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) in the UK and the even more successful annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers, as the key 'international' events in the discipline's calendar, especially when compared with the conferences of the International Geographical Union itself, reinforces the sense that an Anglo-American version of geography has now become, at least to many Anglophones, the definition of the international. This sits in contrast to 100 years ago, for example, when French and German were considered equally seriously as important languages of scientific, and specifically geographical, communication.

The issue of language is important because whilst other disciplines such as mathematics, physics, economics and the natural sciences rely at least in part on their distinctive international languages of communication, human geography arguably relies more than ever before on conventional forms of written expression. This is especially true because maps, once the common visual language of all geographers, are now less widely deployed as *analytical* devices within the explanatory language of the discipline and have become instead the preserve of technical experts and specialists in Geographical Information Science and remote sensing. Whilst in the past all geographers, regardless of affiliation and sub-disciplinary interests, were expected to create maps and make their arguments, at least in part, through visual and cartographic means, the map has ceased to be part of the common language of the discipline in a way comparable to even the 1960s or 1970s, for example. Paradoxically this has coincided with a period in which maps, through the likes of GPS or Google Earth, have in a popular