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Researching Transnational History: The Example of Peace Activism

Thomas Richard Davies

The pioneer scholar of transnational history Akira Iriye has argued: ‘National histories have been the predominant scholarly category since the study of history was established as a discipline in Europe in the nineteenth century’ (Iriye 2004: 211). In the period since the end of the Cold War, however, this has become increasingly challenged by historians’ growing concern with subjects that transcend national boundaries. The emerging discipline of ‘transnational history’ is now manifested in many forms, including academic centres, book series, edited collections, journals, monographs, networks and websites. This chapter aims to provide an introduction to transnational history, its nature, purposes and contributions, as well as to the practice of conducting historical research into transnational phenomena. The example of peace activism – one of the oldest and richest forms of transnational political historical research – will be used in illustration, and reference will be made to *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Iriye and Saunier 2009), which has helped to define this emerging field of research.

Precursors

Although the discipline of transnational history is of relatively recent origin, historical research dealing with subjects that transcend national boundaries is far from new. One of the oldest forms of historical writing, biography, has commonly dealt with highly transnational subject matter, as the lives of its subjects cross national borders. Biographical studies of people as varied as Thomas Paine, Vladimir Lenin and Ruhollah Khomeini are not possible without considering the crossing of national borders by their subject matter, whether by the person or by their activities. In these cases the transnational nature of the ideas put forward by these individuals is one of the key aspects of their work. This indicates another
field of historical research that has long focused on phenomena beyond state boundaries: intellectual history, with its focus on such transnational movements as the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism. Related fields such as the history of science, medicine, art, philosophy and religion, to name just a few, have as a result of the nature of their subject matter had to look beyond the confines of the nation-state. There have also long been studies of ‘world history’, with notable early examples in the English language having been produced by Walter Raleigh and Alexander Ross in the seventeenth century. Historians themselves have also organized their activities transnationally in the form of international conferences, associations and publications since at least the nineteenth century (Erdmann 2005).

It is in the field of political history over the last two centuries that the limitations of the nation-state have been most apparent, with historical work commonly focusing on the development of the national politics of particular states, or – in the case of international history – the interactions between these states. Nevertheless there have been a number of exceptions to this, including works on empires, ideologies, political movements and public and private international organizations. Pioneer historical studies of transnational political subjects written before the term ‘transnational history’ had entered discourse include general works such as F.S.L. Lyons’ *Internationalism in Europe, 1815-1914* (Lyons 1963), and works on particular themes such as women’s international organization (Whittick 1979) and peace movements (Beales 1931).

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**Defining Transnational History**

Historians have been slow to adopt the term ‘transnational’ as a means for describing their focus. They have, however, subsequently played an important role in investigating the roots of the term. Pierre-Yves Saunier has noted usage as early as 1862 by German linguist Georg Curtius in attempting to highlight how national languages were connected to transnational language families (Iriye and Saunier 2009: 1047). Early political uses include Randolph Bourne’s with respect to the transcending of European nationalisms by the cosmopolitan population of the United States (Bourne 1916 cited in Thelen 1999: 967) and Norman Angell’s with respect to the interconnected world economy in 1921 (Ceadel 2009: 247). In political science, the study of ‘transnational relations’ had entered the mainstream by the 1970s (Keohane and Nye 1972).

The development of ‘transnational history’ as a distinct academic discipline appears to have coincided with the ending of the Cold War. It is generally distinguished from comparative history in which the national level remains the principal focus but comparisons between nations are made, from international history for which the interactions among nations are the key focus, and from world history for which the world as a whole is the focus rather than the processes, issues and actors that transcend national boundaries.
Iriye’s 1989 article on ‘the internationalization of history’ is commonly seen as pioneering the establishment of transnational history as a distinct discipline. In this article, he noted ‘the need to go beyond national frameworks and to look for transnational … themes’ (Iriye 1989: 8). This was taken further by Ian Tyrrell in 1991 in an article that advocated a ‘new transnational history’ constructed through examination of regional and global themes including systemic pressures and the environment, as well as transnational organizations, movements and ideologies (Tyrrell 1991a: 1038-53).

Subsequent authors have aimed more clearly to demarcate the nature of transnational history. David Thelen, for example, has argued that transnational history aims to provide insights into how transnational phenomena have ‘passed over the nation, observing the nation as a whole; or … passed across the nation, seeing how it bumped over natural and manmade features; … [and] passed through the nation, transforming and being transformed’ (Thelen 1999: 968). Since then Patricia Clavin (2005: 438-9) has put forward ‘transnational community’ as an historical concept that is best understood: ‘not as an enmeshed or bound network, but rather as a honeycomb, a structure which sustains and gives shapes to the identities of nation-states, institutions, and particular social and geographic space’ and which ‘contains hollowed-out spaces where institutions, individuals and ideas wither away to be replaced by new organizations, groups and innovations’.

Summarizing these developments Ian Tyrrell (2007) has argued that what makes transnational history distinct from other fields of research such as global and comparative history is that it is ‘a broader church that encompasses global history’ but also recognizes ‘the importance of the nation while at the same time contextualizing its growth’. For Tyrrell the core concern of transnational history is ‘the movement of peoples, ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries’.

Possibly the most significant reference work to have developed in the field of transnational history is *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Iriye and Saunier 2009). Its contents provide an indication of the topics that have become the focus of the emerging field. These have been categorized into ten broad themes: 1) flows of people including migration, missionaries and the transport structures on which they rely; 2) world orders including ideologies and international regimes; 3) communication including the media and language; 4) economic factors including trade and industrialization; 5) the environment and resources; 6) key events such as the Bolshevik revolution and geographical spaces such as Africa; 7) aspects of human existence as varied as diet, fashion and religion; 8) broad concepts such as globalization and decolonization; 9) the wide range of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs); and 10) artistic and scientific endeavour (Iriye and Saunier 2009: xxvi-xxxvi).
The apparent ‘transnational turn’ in historical research has been driven by a broad range of motives. A common strand of thought has been disappointment with and desire to challenge the apparent methodological nationalism prevalent in literature on political history. This was crucial for the two authors whose work at the end of the Cold War effectively established the discipline. In promoting transnational history Iriye (1989: 7) expressed frustration with historians’ acceptance of nationalism ‘as the prevalent ideology of the time’. As for Tyrrell (1991a: 1033), he argued that: ‘No one doubts the importance of both nationalism and the nation-state in the modern world. Yet, all too often, the primacy of these concepts is assumed by historians. ... History is, much more than most historians are willing to accept, a constructed body of knowledge.’

In addition to these ideological motivations for research into transnational history, Pierre-Yves Saunier (2006, 2008) has also identified a range of practical motivations. For some transnational historians, such as researchers into migrant networks, he argues (2006: 3) it is the ‘historical object, in its deployment, that calls for a gaze which reaches far beyond the borders [of states]’. In other cases he notes (2006: 4): ‘going transnational derives from the necessity to catch not a family, not an ethnic group, but one of those restless individuals whom, by duty, strategy or need, lived their lives scattered in many places’. For a further set of authors, Saunier (2006: 5) argues: ‘going transnational was a way to pursue, in a different context, their conception of writing history’, such as feminist authors who found the transnational focus to be a ‘logical spin-off of the “oppositional” position’ of their existing research.

Two broad motivations for transnational historical research can therefore be identified. The first is transnational history as part of a progressive agenda challenging nationalism. This can be seen both in general works of transnational history such as Iriye (2002) and in works on peace activism such as Lynch (1999) and Wittner (1993-2003). For others it is simply necessary to take a transnational perspective because of the border-crossing nature of the subject matter, as is the case in research into peace activism by Howard (1978) and Davies (2007), for which the transnational nature of the subject matter is not interpreted as part of a progressive trend.

Despite the perceived advantages of research into transnational history, some historians have noted the potential risks associated with this research agenda, especially that which is motivated by purportedly progressive beliefs. Possibly the most notable is Michael McGerr (1991: 1066), who argues: ‘Transnational history, for all its advantages, seems to offer another means of avoiding the realities of nationalism and national power. The potential costs include an incomplete history and an estrangement from our audiences, which, at least in the United States, still seem intensely nationalistic.’ His most important observation (McGerr 1991: 1066-7) was the potential for the historical record to be ‘manipulated in the service of the “new transnational history.” ... It would be a shame to seize the moral and
intellectual high ground only to substitute our own evasions and illusions for theirs.’

Forms of Research into Transnational History

Works in the field of transnational history have investigated a huge range of subject materials. The ten broad aspects that The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History adopts as its focus have already been noted. In this section the focus will be upon providing a brief overview of transnational historical work into three broad themes: transnational actors, transnational processes and transnational ideas.

The major transnational (i.e. non-state) actors may be divided into four principal categories (although the boundaries between these categories may be fluid): legal non-profit-making INGOs, legal profit-making transnational corporations, illegal profit-making transnational criminal organizations and illegal non-profit-making transnational terrorist networks. There are works of transnational history that have shed light on each of these, although commonly this is work of historical nature produced by scholars based in departments of anthropology, politics, sociology and other disciplines. In respect of INGOs, there are both broad surveys such as Iriye (2002) and Boli and Thomas (1999a), and works on individual organizations such as Tyrrell (1991b) and Clark (2001) and particular campaigns such as (in the case of peace activism) Evangelista (1999) and Davies (2007). As for transnational corporations, there are also both general historical surveys of corporations such as Chandler and Mazlish (2005), and studies of particular themes such as foreign investment in the United States (Wilkins 2004). Although less voluminous, there are historical studies of both transnational organized crime, such as work on the trade in illicit drugs (Courtwright 2001), and the development of transnational terrorist networks, such as Mamdani (2004).

As well as studies of transnational actors, historical work has shed light on transnational cultural, economic, environmental, political and social processes. One of the core focuses for Iriye’s work has been the process of cultural exchange, which is explored especially in his 1997 work on Cultural Internationalism and World Order. There are also interesting studies of the transnational history of specific cultural topics such as literature (Casanova 2004), as well as culture more generally (Gienow-Hecht and Schumacher 2004). Processes of economic globalization and interdependence have also been subjected to historical treatment, including general treatments of ‘global capitalism’ (Frieden 2006) and coverage of particular topics such as trading (Jones 1998). Transnational environmental problems have attracted a developing body of historical literature, including studies both of particular issues such as disease (Kiple 1993) and climate change (Fleming 1998) and of the environmental movement more generally (McCormick 1995). Transnational political processes that have received considerable transnational historical treatment include decolonization (Duara 2004), rebellion (Horn and Kenney 2004) and revolution (Van der Pijl 1996), and there are multiple studies of transnational political movements,
both in general (Martin 2008) and with respect to individual movements including pacifism (Cooper 1991, Brock and Young 1999), humanitarianism (Moorehead 1998) and movements claiming to promote the interests of labour (Silver 2003) and women (Rupp 1997). Transnational social processes have also been the subject of historical studies, such as migration (Bade 2003) and tourism (Smith 1998), as well as the transport infrastructures (Lay 1992) and forms of communication including language (Ostler 2005) and the media (Read 1992) that facilitate them. In addition historical work has provided insights into transnational ideas, including religion (Masuzawa 2005), science (McClellan and Dorn 2006) and ideologies including internationalism (Navari 2000).

The Value of Research into Transnational History: The Example of Peace Activism

It has only been possible to highlight a few of the numerous forms of transnational history in the preceding section. It is clear from this, however, that one of the values of transnational history is its considerable breadth. Beyond this, there are many insights that an historical perspective can provide into particular topics. This section will focus on the example of the historical study of peace activism to shed light on the sorts of insights, both empirical and normative, that historical research can provide into the study of non-state actors.


One of the most significant aspects of non-state actors that historical research – both into peace activism and into transnational phenomena more generally – has provided insights into is their origins. A growing body of literature is exploring themes such as the ‘roots of global civil society’ and the founding rationales of non-governmental organizations.¹ Historical research has uncovered material on

¹ For example, in 2009 Cambridge University held a conference on ‘The Roots of Global Civil Society: From the Rise of the Press to the Fall of the Wall’, and City University, London has funded a project on the founding rationales of INGOs, which has resulted
early INGOs, such as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (established in 1839 and now known as Anti-Slavery International) and the General Council of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (a humanitarian group which has been operating in Paris since 1833 and on an international basis since 1842), revealing the importance of, inter alia, religion, reform, information collection and circulation, and organizational co-ordination and multiplication as vital motives for their establishment (Maynard 1963, Davies 2010). It is commonly held that the first peace societies were established on both sides of the Atlantic towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and historical work has shown how ‘in the decades of comparative peace in Europe which followed the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 public opinion became more optimistic about the capacity of governments to stay out of war … [and] developed a confidence that citizens could pressurize reluctant governments to settle at least some disputes peacefully’ (Ceadel 1996: 2). This context was important in the emergence not only of peace organizations but of private international associations more generally.

As well as the origins of non-state actors, historical work has also shed light on their evolution. In the case of the peace movement, there are detailed studies both of the development of peace organizations in individual countries (Ceadel 2000) and from an international perspective (Van der Linden 1987). Through works such as these it has been possible to trace the overall evolution of peace activism since the early Christian pacifist organizations of 1815. By the turn of the twentieth century it has been shown how peace societies had developed both transnational bodies such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (established by members of parliaments in 1889) and the International Peace Bureau (set up to co-ordinate the activities of private peace associations in 1891), and ‘a central vision … which … can be called “liberal internationalism”’ (Cooper 1986: 233). With the onset of the First World War organizations such as the International Peace Bureau became marginalized by a new range of associations, particularly those concentrating on promotion of the League of Nations, such as the largest national peace association in history, the British League of Nations Union which claimed a dues-paying membership of over 400,000 at its peak (Birn 1981: 130). Although the movement for the League of Nations has had successors in the period since the Second World War, such as the World Federation of United Nations Associations, the most notable elements of the peace movement in the post-war era have been shown to have included those promoting abolition of nuclear weapons and those opposing particular military interventions such as the Vietnam War (Carter 1992). Beyond the material on peace activism there are more general works on the evolution of non-state actors, notably Boli and Thomas’ Constructing World Culture (1999a). Studies such as these have played a valuable role in promoting a more sophisticated understanding of how transnational actors may evolve, highlighting in particular the way in which organizations may develop in waves rather than following a path of linear progress as is too commonly assumed in work on contemporary transnational civil society. Material on the historical evolution of non-state actors has also highlighted the in an online database at www.ingoevolution.org.
range of economic, environmental, political, technological and social factors that underpin the evolution (Davies 2008: 5-6).

A further contribution that historical work has made to understanding non-state actors is the insight it has provided into the interactions of non-state actors with other actors in world politics. Charnovitz (1997), for example, provides a particularly insightful survey of the interactions between NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) since the Congress of Vienna. He highlights the range of interactions, including participation in delegations, meetings, advisory panels, policy development and implementation, and even as members of intergovernmental bodies (Charnovitz 1997: 281-2). Other historical work has focused on particular case studies of non-state actors’ interaction with governmental actors. In the case of research into peace activism, the Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907 have been subjected to considerable historical treatment that highlights how peace organizations pioneered tactics for lobbying intergovernmental conferences adopted more widely later in the twentieth century (Tate 1942). In another historical work on peace activism Davies (2007) uses the historical case study of a substantial transnational non-governmental campaign for disarmament – that claimed to speak on behalf of up to a billion people – from the 1920s and 1930s to evaluate the factors that facilitate success and failure of non-governmental campaigns, concluding that, however considerable a campaign might be, ‘activism will be inhibited from achieving its goals if its propaganda is inconsistent’ (Davies 2007: 172).

As well as empirical aspects of non-state actors, historical literature has also contributed towards understanding of normative dimensions of non-state actors. Here, too, the historical perspective has commonly served to balance some of the more optimistic assertions of literature focused on non-state actors in the post-Cold War era, such as the belief that global civil society may provide ‘an answer to war’ (Kaldor 2003). Howard (1978: 130), for example, describes the history of internationalism as a ‘melancholy story of the efforts of good men to abolish war but only succeeding to make it more terrible’. Charnovitz (1997: 284), on the other hand, claims to show ‘how NGOs can improve IGOs and how NGOs can promote peace’. Similar arguments have been put forward by some of the leading peace movement historians, who have claimed that their work ‘directly advances the cause of peace’ by ‘seeking to establish what contributes to the outbreak and preservation of peace’ (Summy and Saunders 1995: 22). Other contributions that peace movement historians claim to have made include delineating the ‘effect of peace activity on society’ such as in contributing to the creation of the League of Nations and in turn the United Nations and to the peaceful course and ending of the Cold War, and by showing how ‘frequently’ peace activists ‘have been right’ (Summy and Saunders 1995: 12-25).

One further contribution of historical research to our understanding of non-state actors has been to shed light on the variety of perspectives that may exist among non-state actors. In the course of his research into peace activism, for example, Martin Ceadel (1987) has delineated a spectrum of approaches to war and peace, from pacifism through to militarism. Ceadel’s work into peace movement history
(1987: 5) has revealed the distinction between pacifist and pacific-ist movements: whereas the pacifist tends to believe in restraint from war under all circumstances, the pacific-ist may accept the use of armed force under limited circumstances such as to defend reforms to the international system designed to render war obsolete (for instance the collective security mechanisms of the League of Nations).

As well as these specific contributions of transnational history to understanding non-state actors, it is also worthwhile to note the more general value of historical research to the social scientist. As Dennis Kavanagh (1991: 483-95) has argued, historical research can provide a repository of source material, a means to assist understanding of context and consequences (and thereby avoidance of unjustified generalization), evidence for the generation and testing of hypotheses and frameworks, a means to understand the concepts used in social science, and (riskily) a source of apparent lessons.

Conducting Research into Transnational History

Research into transnational history is an exceptionally complex task, going beyond the simple confines of research limited to the nation-state. This section will explore the source materials available to the transnational historian, the problems associated with that material and the wider potential pitfalls of research into transnational history. It will focus in particular on source materials on INGOs and the example of research into peace activism.

One of the principal reasons for the pre-eminence of the national unit as the focus for historical analysis is the plentiful availability of primary source material catalogued and made available in national archives. These materials, however, are also a vitally useful resource for the transnational historian. As has already been noted, one of the key concerns of transnational history is the way in which transnational phenomena interact with national-level actors. In the case of INGOs, national governmental actors are commonly the target of their campaigns, and so the archives of government ministries commonly contain both documents produced by non-state actors and those produced by the ministries in response. National archives also commonly contain reports from their respective embassies on not only the governmental developments in their respective countries but also the activities of particularly notable non-state actors. In the case of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, for instance, the materials in FO 371 are a particularly rich and well-catalogued resource.

Further official archives that may include relevant information include the local government archives of sub-national administrative units, such as the London Metropolitan Archives, which commonly contain material on local activities of non-state actors. At the other end of the spectrum are the archives of IGOs, which have been helpfully catalogued in the UNESCO Archives Portal.2 As with national

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archives, these commonly contain both the correspondence received from non-state actors and the official responses, as well as the reports of secretariat members of their observations of non-state actors’ activities. These official resources tend to be amongst the most comprehensive and well-catalogued available, but tend to consist of the materials that appeared to those collating them to best serve the official interests of their institutions.

In addition to official archives there are the archives of INGOs. One of the most notable collections is that of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which has a particularly comprehensive collection of archives of international labour organizations, as well the archives of a range of other international NGOs, including Greenpeace and Amnesty International. University special collections commonly also contain NGO archives: prominent examples include those of the London School of Economics and London Metropolitan University in London, the Library of Contemporary International Documentation in Nanterre, Paris, Columbia University in New York and the Hoover Institution in Stanford. Particularly comprehensive collections of materials of international peace organizations are located in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection in Pennsylvania, the League of Nations Archives in Geneva and the Peace Palace Library in the Hague. A limited number of INGOs allow personal visits by historians to their own archives, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The archives of INGOs have the advantage of being produced by the transnational actors themselves. However, they are rarely as comprehensive or clearly catalogued as governmental archives, and access can be highly restricted. The archives of many INGOs have been lost, and organizations with limited resources have had a limited capacity to maintain comprehensive records of their activities.

Given the limitations of organizational records of non-state actors the transnational historian has commonly preferred to rely on the private correspondence of individuals involved in transnational activities and organizations. These are scattered across national archives, international organization archives, national and local library and university special collections, and in private possession. Private papers are commonly more comprehensive than the archives of NGOs but access is commonly restricted and the materials can be skewed towards the particular perspectives of the individual who collected them. Nevertheless, for the peace movement historian the personal papers of leading individuals such as Bertha von Suttner (in the United Nations Library in Geneva), Robert Cecil (in the British Library in London) and Jane Addams (in Swarthmore College Peace Collection) are amongst the most comprehensive sources, and often provide much greater insights than interviews or published diaries and memoirs.

The publications of transnational actors form a further set of resources for the transnational historian. In addition to the memoirs and diaries of people who have led transnational lives (for examples of such individuals from internationalism and the peace movement see Kuehl 1983 and Josephson 1985), there are the journals, annual reports, pamphlets, posters and other publications of transnational organizations. Generally these printed outputs provide very partial information
in comparison to archival sources but can be especially useful for research into non-state actors whose archives either do not exist or are inaccessible.

As well as the traditional primary sources discussed so far, a growing body of database and statistical material on transnational actors has developed for the use of the transnational historian. The principal source of this material is the Union of International Associations based in Brussels, which publishes the annual *Yearbook of International Organizations*, which is widely perceived to be the most comprehensive survey of INGOs currently produced (see also Chapter 2 by Bloodgood in this volume). Having been published in a variety of formats since the *Annuaire de la Vie Internationale* of the first decade of the twentieth century, the *Yearbook* has been a commonly-used resource by those aiming to understand trends in transnational associational life over the last century and more (Boli and Thomas 1999a). It is particularly useful as a first point of reference for discovering which organizations were established in different years, locations and fields of human endeavour. It is less comprehensive, however, in terms of its description of the composition, membership and activities of the organizations it includes, and is more comprehensive in its coverage of organizations based in Europe – and particularly Brussels – than those based elsewhere.

The diffuse and often partial nature of source materials on transnational actors and activities is just one of the potential pitfalls of research into transnational history. It is important also to consider the potential distortions of research using a transnational rather than a national or a local lens. For example, a focus on activities that cross borders has the potential to miss the significance of those borders. A transnational perspective may also lead to neglect of the significance of the considerable variations that exist between different geographical and psychological spaces. In the case of the peace movement historian, there has commonly been temptation to adopt the same perspective as that of the object of study (Evangelista 1999).

**Conclusion**

Transnational history remains at an experimental stage. As this survey has shown, its scope is very considerable, encompassing but going beyond work on global, national and local history and examining the phenomena that cross borders. Research into transnational history is valuable not only for its investigation of material that traditional historical analyses have commonly overlooked, but also for the perspectives that an historical approach provides into a subject matter that has often been analysed in its present form without reference to its past development.

Although this chapter has highlighted the considerable variety of existing work in the field of transnational history the scope for future research is wide. There are as yet only a limited number of works on the overall development of transnational actors and processes, and only a very small number of particular examples of transnational actors and processes have received detailed historical treatment.
Further Reading

Recommended for further reading are Iriye and Saunier (2009), Tyrrell (1991a) and Carter (1992).