



US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Michele Pajero

Project title: Humanitarianism and the Cold War: Refugees in Honduras during the 1980s

Summary of the project:

Thanks to the Phelan US Centre PhD Summer Grant, I was able to visit the US National Archives (College Park, MD) and the Library of Congress (Washington, DC) between July 8th and July 21st, 2024.

My dissertation investigates the impact of World War II on colonial relations in North Africa and is largely based on archival research. Producing a diverse and plural account of colonial relations across different empires in a time of global war, necessarily means travelling to various countries to include as many perspectives and actors as possible. That is the only way to address three main biases that are displayed by traditionally nation-based historical research on colonialism and war. First, colonial archives display a lack of representation or misrepresentation of colonized peoples. Second, many sources on war violence often go missing – either intentionally or unintentionally – during wars, and the experience of civilians behind the frontline is usually neglected. Third and finally, national archives suffer per definition from a nation-state bias.

These three problematic elements need to be addressed by conducting an inter-national and cross-national archival research that privileges pluralism of perspectives and actors. This is exactly what this US Phelan Centre allowed me to do. The substantial military/political intervention of the US in North Africa during World War II produced a vast array of primary sources that are now available to researchers. Such sources can be read against European sources and ultimately provide a distinct perspective on the problem of colonialism and international relations. For example, the US did not share French or Italian geopolitical ambitions over the region, and ideologically speaking they were critical of European colonialism. This means that American sources gave more space and credit to Arab voices, and that they were eager to analyze and criticize in depth European colonial policies. Without including US archives in my project, I would not have been able to access many letters, memos and notes of Tunisians and Algerians that were ignored, censored or suppressed by European officials. In short, this Phelan US Centre grant gave me the opportunity to add diversity and depth of analysis to my research.

I will now go through the description of the archives that I visited and the main collections that I was able to access there.

At the US National Archives, I went through original documents produced by both the military (Office of Strategic Services and War Department) and civilian (US Department of State and Office of War Information) branches of the US government. Here the most relevant collection is formed by Hooker Doolittle's papers. He worked as diplomat in North Africa between 1933 and 1943, when he left his role as US Consul General in Tunis. His perceptive gaze and long experience in Maghrebi affairs allowed him to build a close relationship with North African political leaders and civil society members. He strongly advocated in favor of the Destour Party in Tunisia and documented in great details how the French ally persecuted the Tunisian population during the 1942-43 reconquest of the country. Without being able to access his papers, my understanding of French-Arab relations in wartime Tunisia would have lacked important numbers, facts and interpretations on colonial policing and political repression.

At the Library of Congress, I accessed the Archibald Roosevelt Jr Papers collection. This expert in Arab affairs was stationed in Algeria and Tunisia as intelligence officer in 1943. His papers provide a detailed picture of the triangular relationship between the North African population, the French regime, and the US. He held direct channels of communications with leading members of the Algerian and Tunisian political parties and was in close dialogue with other experts in Arab affairs among US' allies. His expertise made him a perceptive observer of colonialism, while his experience turned him into an advocate for a more proactive role of the US in the area. Without being able to access his papers, I could have not accessed the great richness of data, interpretations and analysis produced by the US intelligence community in European colonial empires.

Both A. Roosevelt Jr and H. Doolittle held a critical stance towards French repressive policies, a positive view of the US role in the region, and contributed to give strength to Arab voices at an inter-allied level. Their papers offer a well-documented, unique view on colonial relations in wartime North Africa. A view which, to be sure, would be largely missing from a research focusing only on European archives.