

PACS - Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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Minor Peace and Conflict Studies

By John Hogan, coordinator of the programme



The popularity of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) programme continued to grow this year, with 81 students taking the full minor in the academic year 2023-24, an increase of 33 on last year. When one factored in additional students taking certain courses that make up the minor on an elective basis, this growth was also evident, with up to 131 students taking certain classes. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the violence that has shocked us all in Palestine and Israel in recent months, it is probably safe to assume that these increased numbers are partially down to a general growth in public interest in the workings of international security. However, we are also confident that it is reflective of the quality of programme, the dedication of our teachers, and the range of interdisciplinary perspectives that our students engage with on questions of peace and conflict across the semester.

This year, in addition to educational activities in the context of seminars and lectures, we have been particularly active with initiatives outside of the classroom. Our students once again returned to the Hague for a field trip that took in both the International Criminal Court and the NGO Cordaid. At both sites, our students were introduced to the work of staff engaged in furthering peace and security in very different contexts. In addition, two events were organised by staff from the PACS programme in recent weeks that focused on the events that have been unfolding in Israel and Palestine, and which garnered significant interest from our Minor students.

Marije Luitjens, coordinator of the course “Peace and Conflict: From Theory to Practice”, and I organised an event in November, titled ‘What about the People: Providing Historical and Regional Context to the Current War in Israel-Palestine’. Scholars from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, law and politics, spoke about the circumstances that had led to the latest tragic chapter in the conflict.

Of course, the success of all of the above events relies heavily on our students as organisers, participants and attendees. This year, we were again very lucky to welcome a large cohort of engaged and passionate students, keen to learn about the causes, consequences and solutions to violence from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Amongst that number, we are lucky to have four very capable student representatives - Britt van Middendorp, Marin Schaapman, Natalia Huggins, Anna ter Morsche. Below you can find a brief account of how they have experienced the Minor so far this academic year.

Minor Peace and Conflict Studies – students' experience

By Britt van Middendorp, Marin Schaapman, Natalia Huggins, Anna ter Morsche

It's December, and the Minor in Peace and Conflict Studies programme that we started at the beginning of this college year is soon coming to an end. Up until now, we have discussed a variety of topics related to peace and conflict from a number of different perspectives. We have talked about philosophy and ethics, the human condition but also about the legal part of conflicts. There are a number of factors that distinguish this minor from others and make it unique.



Picture right: Britt van Middendorp
Picture below: Marin Schaapman



Firstly, the courses take an interdisciplinary approach which makes for an interesting minor with a lot of different insights and opinions, in addition to having international students from all over the world. These differences can sometimes create friction, but through discussing our different points of view and mutual respect, we learn to see situations from another person's perspective. Secondly, there is a big focus on the well-being of students, which creates a safe environment within the minor. The professors play an active role in making sure the students are able to talk about their worries, discomforts and feelings.

Thirdly, the many guest lectures and the excursion to The Hague allowed the students to interact with professionals in the field. The students were thus able to connect with the interdisciplinary possibilities that exist in the courses of the Minor in Peace and Conflict Studies.

Lastly, the fact that all the course material is interconnected allows for a cohesive comprehension of the minor. Of course, there are still some things that need to be improved but since it is a relatively new minor that has been established at the VU, the current developments have brought great promise for its future. We believe that with minor adjustments and with the application of the provided feedback from students, it can become an even more complete, successful and enjoyable minor.

Picture right: Natalia Huggins



We feel like this programme broadens the horizons of all the students that follow it. Furthermore, it grants students the opportunity to integrate all sorts of perspectives into their own comprehension of the world. It allows us to think about the past, current, and future state of the world and how we can possibly, or at least hope to, play a role in making a positive change.

Picture left: Ana ter Morsche

Exploring the Impact of Emotions on Scholars in Conflict Studies: A Roundtable Discussion

By Lourdes Melese

As part of the introduction session for the Peace and Conflict Minor, The VU Peace and Conflict Studies Centre hosted an interactive roundtable discussion that delved into the intricate relationship between emotions and scholars in the field of conflict studies on 30 August 2023. The interdisciplinary panel of participants included Alette Smeulers (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen), Anne-Marie de Brouwer (co-founder of Impact & Mukomeze), Gabriele Chlevickaite, Nina Petzel, and Marije Luitjes (all VU Amsterdam). Moderated by Maartje Weerdesteijn and Willemijn Born, the event provided a platform for scholars to share their personal experiences and insights into how emotions influence their work, their teaching and their interaction with the subjects of their studies.

The discussion's central theme revolved around the intricate duality of emotions - their potential to ignite scholarly dedication while simultaneously presenting challenges in managing personal and professional boundaries. Within this context, participants brought attention to the intricate dynamics of studying individuals entangled in conflicts. For some participants, their engagement with victims and survivors posed emotional demands, as they shared their experiences grappling with feelings of empathy and anger that could prove overwhelming if left unaddressed. The discourse extended to the study of perpetrators, noting the disconcerting realization that these individuals often appear as ordinary, raising emotional and morally troubling questions about the potential for anyone to commit such actions. In navigating these emotionally charged terrains, the participants underscored the significance of preserving a certain emotional distance while simultaneously embracing and acknowledging emotions. This balance, they contended, is a pivotal factor in ensuring productive and well-rounded research outcomes in the field.



Furthermore, the participants emphasized the vitality of nurturing empathy while simultaneously safeguarding against emotional burnout. The significance of self-awareness and the establishment of protocols in this delicate endeavour were highlighted. Nevertheless, it was recognized that certain (cultural) contexts spheres might impede emotional expression and look down upon the interpretation of objectivity as including any type of emotion. Additionally, the participants highlighted the gendered dimension of emotional involvement, accentuating the importance of destigmatizing emotions, cultivating

open dialogues within academic and broader societal contexts.

The roundtable provided a unique insight into the emotionally charged world of conflict studies, demonstrating that emotions can both drive and challenge scholarly pursuits. This open discussion shed light on the multifaceted nature of emotions, the importance of self-awareness, and the need for empathy in navigating the complexities of conflict studies. The event encouraged students to reflect on the emotional dimensions inherent in the study of conflicts and their aftermath.

Conference Dictators and Dissidents

by Antonia Milzkott

On November 6th, the academic conference *Dictators and Dissidents* took place at VU Amsterdam, offering a diverse and insightful exploration of dictators, dissidents, and nonviolent resistance within repressive regimes. Drawing an audience of approximately 45 students, academics, and practitioners, the interdisciplinary panel served as a forum for scholars to share their research, presenting a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies involved in various contexts of nonviolent resistance, including those in Belarus, Serbia, Egypt, and Zambia. The conference commenced with an introduction by the organizers, Willemijn Born (VU Amsterdam) and Dr. Maartje Weerdesteijn (VU Amsterdam), providing an overview of resistance dynamics within authoritarian regimes, as well as the strategies and challenges faced by dissidents engaging in nonviolent activism.



The conference was divided into two sections, moving from a dictators' to a dissidents' perspective. First, Dr. Maartje Weerdesteijn shed some light onto the decision-making processes of dictators when dealing with dissidents, while Dr. Kjersti Lohne (University of Oslo), dived into the challenges of international justice advocacy and the potential role of the ICC within dictatorships and Dr. Stephen McLoughlin (Coventry University) provided valuable insights into the dynamics of authoritarianism, popular resistance, and the mechanisms facilitating nonviolent regime change, drawing from his research on Zambia. Fatma Zaki Khalil (VU) then introduced the trajectories of contestation within repressive regimes, offering insights into the motivational dynamics that drive individuals to resist authoritarian rule. Dr. Edin Mujkic (University of Colorado Springs) zoomed into the OTPOR! movement in Serbia, focussing on the effective tactics employed by this movement in ousting Milosevic, while Dr. Barbora Hola (VU) provided an anecdotal account of everyday resistance to collaboration in communist Czechoslovakia.

Both sections of the conference were followed by interactive discussions chaired by Dr Joris Van Wijk (VU) and Wolfgang Wagner (VU). Questions by the audience ranging from the selectivity of the cases of the ICC, the shifting dynamics of global power structures, the use of a history of violence as preemptive repression, the challenges of sustaining demonstrations, and the role of digital activism led to a lively and inspiring debate. The discussions and insights shared by both audience and experts underscored the complex dynamics inherent in the interactions between those resisting authoritarian rule and the mechanisms employed by dictatorial regimes to squash such resistance. If you want to know more about this topic, all research presented by the speakers will be published in a Special Issue of the [International Criminal Law Review](#). The conference was co-sponsored by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and PACS.

Nobel Peace Prize Working Group and 2024 Nomination

By Wolfgang Wagner

At the beginning of the academic year, Wolfgang Wagner and Marije Luitjens invited students to form a working group and make a nomination for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize. Our students Fabiënne Blom, Paul Frigger, Melissa Gerritsen and Annelies Reefman joined the group. After several meetings and discussions, we nominated “Women of the Sun”, “Women Wage Peace” and “EcoPeace Middle East” for bringing communities together to build peace in the Middle East with a special focus on the role of women and climate justice.

The full motivation that we sent to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee reads as follows:

The Nobel Peace Prize of 2024 should go to representatives of civil society in Israel, Palestine and Jordan who have continued their work to bridge the deep divide between communities in the Middle East. They have resisted pressures to choose sides and have shown empathy and compassion at a time when they lost loved ones in the recent escalation of violence. They remind us of our shared humanity and show the way to a peaceful and better future in the Middle East. In addition, the three NGOs also point to two important dimensions of any future peace in the Middle East: the role of women and climate justice. “Women of the Sun” was founded in 2021 and since then their goal has been to foster peace and the equality of women. Together with Women Wage Peace they are collaborating to promote women’s rights. Women wage peace, was founded in the aftermath of the 50-day Gaza War/Operation Protective Edge of 2014) and has grown to 45,000 Israeli members, making it the largest grassroots peace movement in Israel today.

Both not only advocate for more attention on the well-being of youth and children, but also for a gender equal peace building process. Women of the Sun’s work includes psychological counselling, fostering economic equality between men and women and creative projects. Women wage peace is focused on changing refracts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its resolution, through a gendered lens. They demand for diplomatic negotiation, with full representation of women, to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ecopeace Middle East has been promoting collaboration to protect the environment in Jordan, Palestine and Israel. They seek to create the necessary conditions for lasting peace in the region. Next to their projects regarding the environment, they are also big on educating youth and connecting different people. They have shown continuous efforts regarding their mission of regional integration, sustainable management and water security.

On 20 December we celebrated the nomination with representatives from all three civil society organizations in the auditorium of the VU. Our students addressed the nominees. After a short break, Marije Luitjens chaired a Q&A with the representatives of the organizations.





Paul Frigger and Annelies Reefman addressing our nominees of the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize



Marije Luitjens (upper row, centre) chairing the Q&A with (in clockwise order) Gidon Bromberg (EcoPeace Middle East Tel Aviv), Yael Braudobahat (Women Wage Peace), Marwa Hammad (Women of the Sun), Nada Majdalani (EcoPeace Middle East, Ramallah), and Yana W. Abu Taleb (Eco Peace Middle East Amman).

Who are we?

PACS, the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, is an inter-faculty scholarly network for research on the causes of political violence, on strategies to build peace and on the governance of conflict. These issues require an interdisciplinary approach. Researchers from five faculties – law, social sciences, behavioural and movement sciences, religion and theology as well as humanities - collaborate in PACS.

The PACS management team thus includes: [Wolfgang Wagner](#) (chair), [Arno Akkermans](#), [Paul van Lange](#), [Maartje Weerdesteijn](#), and [Srdjan Sremac](#).

More information on PACS can be found [on our website](#).