SSA 2012 Annual Business Meeting

The SSA Annual Business Meeting was held in conjunction with the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) Annual Meeting on November 17, 2012, in Denver, CO.

The Business Meeting was convened at 3pm. President Joshua Landis opened a discussion of the draft Constitution that had been circulated via email to members a week earlier. He stressed that its changes are mainly in the areas of “democratization,” clarifying that all board positions, except Book Review Editor and Past-President, would now be elected positions. It also states that nominations for all elected positions be solicited from the membership and that the only prerequisite for standing for election to any of these positions, except President, is membership in the association. Nominees for President must have some past board experience. Other than that, the new Constitution clarifies the duties of board positions and some of the activities of the association. The only suggestion for editing came from Geoff Schad, who asked whether we needed the word “nonrenewable” in the description of the position of Past-President. The board agreed to delete that word. Joshua urged all members present to contact Secretary/Treasurer Zayde Antrim to register their approval of the new Constitution, as a one-third vote from the membership is required to ratify it.

Secretary-Treasurer Zayde Antrim announced the results of the 2012 elections for Member-at-Large, Secretary/Treasurer, and Prize Committee Chair. 37 (out of 86) members participated in the election, clearing the one-third bar.

The SSA Board for 2013:

President: Joshua Landis*
Past-President: Fred Lawson*
Secretary/Treasurer: Stacy Fahrenthold
Webmaster: Hilary Kalmbach*
Bulletin Editor: Andrea Stanton*
Book Review Editor: Beverly Tsacoyianis*
Prize Committee Chair: Thomas Pierret
Senior Member-at-Large: Benjamin White*
Junior Member-at-Large: Max Weiss
Graduate Student Representative: Benjamin Smuin*

*Terms ending next year. These positions, with the exception of Past-President and Book Review Editor, will be up for election or reelection in the fall of 2013.

Secretary/Treasurer Zayde Antrim also reported on the state of SSA membership and finances. In 2012, the SSA has 86 members:

6 are honorary/gratis
27 are students
1 institutional member (Syria Report)
21 are new members (15 of them students)
43 used PayPal

SSA funds in the bank amount to $2021.38. It can be expected to grow by about $1000 by MESA 2013, going by the dues payments received and expenses incurred in 2012.
President Joshua Landis announced a new initiative approved by the Board to devote $750 each year from member dues payments to help bring a speaker from Syria to MESA. He tasked Max Weiss, the new Member-at-Large, with taking responsibility for this initiative for 2013.

Bulletin editor Andrea Stanton announced that the fall issue of the Bulletin is out, available electronically by link from the SSA website. A link was also emailed directly to members the week before MESA. She encouraged members to submit articles or ideas for articles. Ben White also encouraged members to think about new kinds of articles, such as “documents from the archives” essays.

James King of the Institute for International Education announced that the Scholar Rescue Fund is seeking to help threatened Syrian scholars and urged the SSA membership to circulate information about SRF fellowships and to contact him or the SSA liaison with the SRF, Keith Watenpaugh, for more information. He can be reached at jking@iie.org or 212-205-6496.

Member-at-Large Heghnar Watenpaugh read aloud a statement on behalf of Prize Committee Chair Steve Tamari, who could not be at MESA this year. This statement is entered into the minutes as follows:

“The Prize Committee of the Syrian Studies Association is pleased to announce the prize for best dissertation in the field of Syrian Studies defended between September 1, 2010 and August 31, 2012.

The number of submissions this year impressed the committee. We had nine (9, IX,⁴) dissertations to evaluate! A lot of work and an embarrassment of riches! This has to be a record in the annals of scholarly production on Syria.

We can say with complete confidence that Syrian studies is not only alive and healthy but it is flourishing!

Even more impressive was the high quality of all submissions. They ran the gamut from a study of a dabke and the politics of belonging to ethnographies of Druze, Shi‘i, and Palestinian refugee communities and the language of neoliberal elites to analyses of cultural diplomacy and the politics of reclaiming lost territory. Though they were produced in faculties of Political Science, History, Religious Studies, Sociology and Anthropology, without exception each was interdisciplinary in one way or another.

All nine were based on extensive fieldwork in Syria. The committee recognizes that these newly minted PhDs may have been the last cohort for some time to come to have had such sustained access to the people and places of Syria. This is a sad commentary of the current state of Syria, but raises the bar for dissertations on Syria to follow.

Given the number and high quality of the submissions, the committee struggled to find a candidate for the top prize. In the end, we decided two dissertations earned this distinction. We hate to split the prize money but we are not splitting our acclaim.

The two winners are:

Sophia Hoffmann who earned a PhD in Political Science and Sociology from the School for Oriental and

and…

Melanie Tanielian, who earned her PhD from the University of California Berkeley in History with “The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918).”

Sophia Hoffmann's dissertation uses ethnographic work in Damascus to illuminate the many ways in which, through everyday interactions between Iraqi migrants and representatives of the Syrian state, other states, NGOs, and international organizations, state sovereignty was constituted both within and beyond Syria. A work of 'critical International Relations', the dissertation offers a theoretically-informed comparative case study that will be useful to researchers in many other fields. [Self-aware without being excessively self-conscious, it impresses particularly in its grasp, and lucid exposition, of the many ironies of the Iraqi migrants' situation.]

Melanie Tanielian's 'The War of Famine', meanwhile, is a rich social history of Beirut and Mount Lebanon during the First World War. A full-length study of this subject in English was long overdue, and this dissertation is just what we needed. Drawing extensively on sociological literature on famine and comparative historical work on cities in the war, it offers its own thoroughly-researched contribution to both fields. From the point of view of Middle East history, it offers a detailed and convincing account of the catastrophic events that, among other things, permanently eroded the legitimacy of Ottoman rule in the area.”

The meeting was concluded at 4pm to begin a special panel discussion on “Perspectives on the Syrian Uprisings,” organized by Heghnar Watenpaugh and Fred Lawson and featuring comments by Seda Altug, Rebecca Joubin, Ben Smuin, Keith Watenpaugh, and Max Weiss.

***

The SSA also sponsored the following three panels at the 2012 MESA Annual Meeting:

1. Sunday, 11/18, 2pm: Post-Ottoman Citizenship Discourses in the Arab Levant

   Shira Robinson (George Washington University), Chair

   Benjamin Thomas White (University of Birmingham), “Refugees and Naitonality in 1920s Syria and Lebanon”


   Hilary Falb (University of California, Berkeley), “‘Are They Educating Their Pupils for a World in which They are To Be First or Second?’: Government Schools and Citizenship in the Mandates for Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine

   Seda Altug (Boğaziçi University), “Debating Syrianness in French-Syria (1936- 1939)”
Will Hanley (Florida State University), Discussant

2. Sunday, 11/18, 4:30pm: Blurring Nationalism and Religion in the Early 20th-Century Middle East

Lisa Pollard (UNC Wilmington), Chair

Ahmet Serdar Akturk (University of Arkansas), “Many Faces of Religion: Kurdish Nationalism in French Mandatory Levant”

Matthew Parnell (University of Arkansas), “What is ‘National Unity?’: Religion, Egyptian Nationalism and the 1919 Revolution”

Stacy Diane Fahrenthold (Northeastern University), “Men of the Nation, Men of the Cloth: Lebanese Diasporic Nationalism and the Church, 1919-1932”

Simon Jackson (European University Institute, Florence), “Sacred Infrastructure: the Maronite Church as Institutional Shareholder in Mandate-Era Economic Development”

Joel Gordon (University of Arkansas), Discussant

3. Monday, 11/19, 2:30pm: Mapping Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion: Sociability in Ottoman Syria

Helen Pfeifer (Princeton University), “Meet Me in the Majlis: Sociability and Ethnicity in Sixteenth-Century Damascus”

Heghnar Watenpaugh (University of California, Davis), “The Coffeehouse: Architecture and Sociability in the Ottoman City”

Vivian Elyse Semerdjian (Whitman College), “Nudity and the Dhimmi Woman: Regulating Co-Confessional Bathing in Eighteenth Century Aleppo”

Astrid Meier (University of Halle-Wittenberg), “An Ottomanization of the Countryside? Village Bathhouses in Ottoman Syria (Damascus, Aleppo, Hama)”

Marianne Boqvist (Swedish Research Institute, Istanbul), “Hospitality Unlimited or Confined? Imperial Imarets on Ottoman Syrian Highways”

As a MESA affiliate, the SSA is permitted to sponsor up to three panels at each Annual Meeting. Sponsorship highlights the panel to MESA attendees and underscores the significance of the study of Syria. Participants in sponsored panels should be members of the SSA. For membership and other information about the SSA, please visit the website: http://www.ou.edu/ssa/.