History Department Welcomes New Professor

By: Alex Steele '11

Next semester Julie Hughes will begin teaching Indian History and Environmental Studies at Vassar. Hughes has recently completed graduate study at the University of Texas at Austin and double majored in History and International Studies at University of Washington. She will teach a range of courses at Vassar including HIST 252: Modern South Asian History, and other courses on South Asian History and on the Environment.

Alex: What undergraduate institution did you attend? What were your interests there, academic or extra curricular?

Hughes: I did a double major in History and International Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. I had no idea what I wanted to study when I started so I ended up taking prerequisites for something practical—accounting. I also took several German classes and did a summer language program in Bonn. Clearly, none of this had anything to do with India! As for activities, the main thing was photography. I was involved for several years in Phi Alpha Theta, a history honors society. I volunteered at a shelter run by PAWS, an animal welfare society north of Seattle.

A: What led you to your current academic interests?

H: A professor named Heidi Pauwels. When I was a sophomore I started studying Hinduism because I knew nothing about it. Dr. Pauwels clearly loved teaching her topic; the course was intellectually stimulating, and I was hooked. I dropped German and started taking Hindi the following year. My focus is not on Hinduism now, but Dr. Pauwels started me on the path to where I am today.

A: What do you think will be challenging about teaching at Vassar? Do you think Vassar’s structure offers any particular advantages to students and faculty?

H: Vassar students are very engaged in their educational experiences, often with the goal of learning something that will help them make a difference in the world. That culture will challenge me to make what I teach relevant to those concerns, whether the topics I cover are a few decades or several centuries old. I think a great advantage of Vassar’s structure, particularly in the History Department, is the emphasis on assigning a good number of primary sources. There seem to be fewer screens put up between students and primary sources, and between students and professors, than is typical at some other places.

A: Who are your favorite historians? Why do you think they’re important? Are there other authors you think that all aspiring historians should read?

H: This is a hard question and very specific to an individual’s particular interests. I do think that everyone can benefit from reading a few Subaltern Studies scholars and getting a sense of their approach (history from below), its advantages, and its challenges. I like historians who tend to be interdisciplinary. Their research and conclusions can be revisionist and the best ones provide examples on how to incorporate alternative sources (artwork, cinema, music) into rigorous historical inquiries. Sumathi Ramaswamy is one example. I think aspiring historians should find someone whose writing they find inspiring, not just competent. Personally, I like Janet Davis. She has a book out on American circuses and another coming soon on animal welfare movements and American colonialism in the Philippines.
Abroad in Prague

By: Nora Lovotti ’11

Greetings from Prague! I have been enjoying myself profusely at Prague Film School this semester. While my semester appears to be dedicated to my Film major (I am double majoring in Film and History and hoping to write a historical screenplay for my senior thesis), my studies and the city of Prague have been ideal for my history major as well. Experiencing Prague on the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, soaking up the Charles Bridge and the Defenestration Window at Prague Castle, waiting for the hour to change at the Astronomical Clock, visiting the synagogues in the Jewish Quarter, taking a Middle European Film History elective...Prague has been an ideal place to spend my semester abroad! While I traveled to other fantastic European cities before my studies (Venice, Paris, and Vienna, to name a few), Prague has never ceased to amaze me with how beautiful it is. Needless to say, the experience of being at a film school and being at Vassar differs greatly—we hardly have any homework, but I do not think I am being presumptuous when I say that many history majors have not had to work with generators and dolly tracks late at night on the freezing Vitava river. While I have been busy writing screenplays, working with lights, and practicing editing techniques, I have held Vassar and the History Department fondly in my heart, and I cannot wait to return next semester (although I have not missed writing papers...)

Clark Fellowship Funds Travel to Hungary

By: Sarah Saiz ’10

Ever since I became a history major, I knew my focus and my thesis would be about Central or Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Of course I knew this was going to pose a problem when the time came for me to choose my thesis, considering my basic Russian language skills would not be so much help. Since primary documents are such an important part of a thesis, or really any history paper, I came to the conclusion that I would have to change my thesis topic to an area where I could read the language.

However, that thought changed when I was abroad. While studying abroad in Prague, one of my professors talked to my class about the archive where he worked, the Open Society Archive. And while the OSA archive has many different areas of research, what interested me the most about it was their large Communism and Cold War collection, with its largest section about the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The best part about the archive, my professor informed us American students, was that there where many documents that were either in English, translated into English, or had English Summaries, since the documents in the Cold War section came from the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. I was so excited about the possibility of being able to do research and find primary sources in English about Communist satellite countries, that I chose to write my thesis about the Hungarian Revolution based on my knowledge of the OSA archive.

I got the Clark fellowship and was able to spend three weeks researching in Budapest at the OSA archive. While I was researching at the archive I kept running across documents that puzzled me and captured my attention. These documents were about the phenomenon of post-1956 Hungarian Exiles who despite all of the risk they took fleeing the country returned within a short period of time, and are now the subject of my thesis.

Photo by Sarah Saiz.
Professor Höhn did not set out to study African Americans in post-Nazi Germany. It was a topic she fell upon, while researching the impact of the more than 60-year lasting U.S. military presence in Germany after 1945. For Professor Höhn, who grew up in a small village in a county comprised of 80,000 German citizens and 40,000 American troops, the American military presence was a reality of daily life. In the course of her larger project to explore the day to day encounters between Germans and U.S. soldiers, she became interested in the story of African American troops, whose participation in the occupation and reeducation of Germany had been largely ignored in previous academic scholarship. What began as a scholarly endeavor, however, now has a deeply personal meaning. Höhn explains, “Black soldiers fought to liberate my country from Fascism at a time when they themselves were not able to enjoy full democracy in their own country. I want to make sure their story is not lost.”

While her first book, GIs and Freundeins explores the impact of America on German society, her new work researches how African American soldiers were impacted by their experiences abroad, and how perhaps American history was changed by that experience. Following World War II, African Americans were part of an occupation army that was assigned to help usher in the age of German democracy, and eradicate the legacies of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, and to educate the Germans toward democracy. For many African American soldiers, the notion of aiding Germans in ridding their society of racism, rightfully appeared hypocritical, given that they themselves were serving in a segregated military. Although officially integrated in 1948, the U.S. military in Germany was not integrated until 1952-54, which further undermined American ideas of democracy.

Höhn became interested in the ways in which German society changed African American soldiers, inspiring them to take action at home. She shows in her work, that for many African Americans coming from the southern United States, “Germany was like a breath of fresh air.” World War II was empowering for many African American soldiers, who were able to leave the Jim Crow South for the first time. As these soldiers returned home from the War, and the occupation of Germany, they claimed that they had experienced more freedom in Germany than they did in the United States. Many joined the Civil Rights Movement and became activists, building alliances with students abroad in Germany, and moving the American fight for civil rights to the global stage.

Höhn’s research has culminated in the writing of a book with fellow German scholar Martin Klimke, on the experience of African American soldiers in Germany and the Civil Rights Movement, entitled A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany, which will be published in 2010 with Palgrave. They have also curated a photography exhibition related to that topic that is currently traveling all over Germany, and will also be shown in universities and museums across the U.S.

Höhn and Klimke also developed an educational website and digital archive to bring attention to the topic, for which they received the Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award from the NAACP in 2009. Höhn hopes her website will open Americans, in particular, students, to a part of African American history that has never been told. She encourages students to visit the website, which can be reached at <http://www.aacvs-germany.org>. She hopes the website will give students a chance to explore the history of African Americans outside of the United States, and gain a valuable international perspective on the topic.
Continuity, Change: the History Department

By: Amanda Waterhouse ’10

Most History majors know something of the history of the History Department. Distinguished professors from days past linger in the names of lectures and department grants, and the constant encouragement to "go to the source." Photos of Swift Infirmary remind us what the space used to be. The more dedicated among us may have even checked out the 'About' section on the Department web site.

While this gives a snappy summary of all those wonderful superstars of the Department's past, what it lacks is perhaps a full appreciation of the very recent past — History in the making, as it were. How have we come to the department as we know it today, and what makes it remarkable?

Leslie Offutt, chair of the department this year, was hired in 1983. She confirms that while many of the professors who laid the department's foundation were female, in her early days, the department was heavily male. According much respect to her early colleagues, Offutt states that the department in those days had "a different feel—more formal." Because there were so many experienced professors and there still existed a tenure cap, departmental hierarchy was more definite and significant. While Professors Miriam Cohen and James Merrell also started back then (1977 and 1984 respectively), there was a ten-year gap between Merrell's arrival and the beginning of a continuous hiring process that would see an almost complete turnover in the department. As senior professors retired, one new professor was hired every year for seven years, beginning with Robert Brigham in 1994. The newest round were brought on board in the early 2000's, ending with Quincy Mills in 2006. Two of the department’s current professors, Lydia Murdoch and Hiraku Shimoda, attended Vassar and then returned to teach here in this period, graduating in 1992 and 1996, respectively.

Offutt describes this extended process as "grueling," but looks upon it fondly as the putting together of a "department that is an extraordinarily exciting place to teach, with scholars who are vibrant and cutting edge."

The hiring process has formal steps, including a spate of interviews at a national hiring conference and the bringing of three finalists to campus for a more extensive evaluation of their fit for the job, but it also has some imagination to it. Indeed, professors to specific posts often differ from their predecessors not only in personality and teaching style, but also in scope of their work. Professor Joshua Schreier filled the space left by a distinguished French historian’s retirement, as the department recognized student interest in both France and the Francophone Middle East. While there was "some homage" to the past position, Offutt qualifies this new direction as an "extraordinarily wise choice."

Perhaps it is not just the department's relatively youthful enthusiasm that makes it so dynamic today. Offutt believes that the formal titles of departmental hierarchy function more as a mentoring framework than anything else. Indeed, in the hiring process, all professors have an equal voice in the dialogue and final vote. Additionally, Offutt emphasizes that the department is "faithful to the idea that each of us teach across the spectrum" of class levels.

As new hires ascend the checkpoints to tenured professorship, senior members of the department not only formally evaluate them, but also may talk about teaching, invite them to sit in on classes, solicit concerns, or provide constructive criticism. They are in a position to offer expertise and guide the way. "What we try to avoid at all costs," asserts Offutt, "is turning to the element of power and injecting it into these relationships." In the same way that many Vassar students pride themselves on intellectual collaboration trumping competition, it seems the department has worked to collaboratively cultivate a new generation of dynamic, engaging professorship.

So what has been sustained in this sweeping changing of the guard? "What is constant," relates Offutt, "are the things that we hold dear as historians." To put it simply, it does all come back to 'going to the source.' In a very practical sense, this is not only what "marked our scholarship and made us worthy of being asked to join here," but also "something that we hold dear and defines us."
Aldous Delivers C. Mildred Thompson Lecture

By: Lila Teeters ’11

Professor of History at the University College Dublin, Richard Aldous unveiled his revisionist research into the relationship between the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Margaret Thatcher and former President of the United States Ronald Reagan as he delivered the annual C. Mildred Thompson Lecture on Nov. 5, 2009.

The relationship between the two dignitaries is the subject of Aldous’ upcoming work The Difficult Relationship, which will be published by W.W. Norton in 2012. The night’s lecture of the same name was a preview of the scholar’s book.

While Aldous’ research is still in the beginning stages, he stated, “it is already becoming apparent that [the Thatcher-Reagan] relationship is very different than that which has often been portrayed by the media and the principle actors [Thatcher and Reagan] themselves.” Currently, Aldous continued, “the language of matrimony dominates analysis” of the Thatcher-Reagan relationship. This popular discourse constructs an image of the leaders as close confidants, while downplaying their divisive differences.

“It is easy to see the attraction in this matrimonial analysis,” Aldous stated. He warned, however, that it “profoundly misunderstands the relationships between the leaders and the nature of politics and policy making in their administrations.” In this model of matrimony, the leaders’ disagreements could be written off as spats between spouses, and an enormous emphasis was placed on any shared ideological goal.

Moreover, each player’s—but particularly Thatcher’s—Independence was subsumed by the pair’s united identity. Aldous hopes that his work will revise this flaw in the relationship’s historiography. Such work, however, comes with immense difficulties. While the common portrayal of the Thatcher-Reagan relationship hides the complexities of the pair’s connection, it is one that, according to Aldous, both Thatcher and Reagan “consciously attempted to foster, particularly in their final years. Each vigorously asserted it in their memoirs.”

Indeed, Aldous argued that the Thatcher and Reagan administrations purposefully aimed to portray the leaders’ relationship as one of great friendship. Most importantly, however, the pair tried to emulate the relationship that existed between former President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt, and former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Winston Churchill.

Churchill famously described this interaction between the leaders and their countries as the “special relationship.” Aldous explained that the administrations of Thatcher and Reagan “seemed attuned to the language of the ‘special relationship’” and worked to engrain it within their Atlantic alliance policies, politics and portrayals.

With the release of policy and administrative documents, however, Aldous has been able to read against the popular constructions of the relationship. Ultimately, Aldous called for an interpretation of the pair through a new lens.

“Competitive cooperation,” Aldous argued, “remains the key to unlocking the complexities of the Reagan-Thatcher relationship.”

According to Aldous, this new reading relies heavily on asking the questions, “What did each leader want from the other, and how did they try to achieve these ends?”

Furthermore, when he looked at the evidence, Aldous claimed that he was shocked by the “sheer relentlessness of the policy divergences.”

Looking at the years 1981 to 1989, Aldous said that the pair disagreed on almost every major foreign and—perhaps most surprisingly—economic policy on the table.

“It’s the relentlessness,” Aldous repeated, that speaks to the need for a revisionist history of Thatcher and Reagan’s interactions.

Aldous emphasized, however, that despite the sometimes-adversarial relationship between the leaders, the image and the practice of the Atlantic alliance remained strong. He stated, “the Atlantic alliance was the first principle of the diplomatic relationship [between the two countries].”

So, while Reagan and Thatcher privately practiced competitive cooperation, in public their advisors and policy-makers continued to uphold the principles of the Atlantic alliance on matters of defense, intelligence, and diplomatic collaboration.

What emerges from Aldous’ work is a tension between the public portrayal and the private practice of the Thatcher-Reagan relationship. At the conclusion of the lecture, Aldous posited that “the relationship between the president and the prime minister [was] a subversive element in the Atlantic alliance,” and that while the alliance continued to function, Thatcher and Reagan practiced an interaction that became “the void at the heart of the ‘special relationship.’”

“After all,” Aldous concluded, “It had been a difficult relationship.”
Faculty Update on Professor Mita Choudhry

By: Sarah Matherly '10

While on leave last year, History Professor Mita Choudhry was researching the case of Catherine Cadière, a twenty-three year old French nun who, accused Jean-Baptiste Girard, her confessor and spiritual guide, of seducing her. The case heard by the Parlement of Aix in 1731, was as ubiquitous at the time as it was scandalous, evoking a national, public response. Cadière was in September of 1731, sentenced to death, and a month later proclaimed innocent and released.

The trial, which began as a provincial matter, ended up bringing forth latent issues of sexual politics and hypocrisy among clerics, as well as factions and rifts within the church—issues that all condensed around the figure of Cadière. Choudhry has written several articles on Cadière and the ferment surrounding her trial, and is currently working on a book entitled, The Cadière/Girard Affair: Seduction and Heresy in 18th Century French Political Culture. It will take the form of a microhistory, highlighting the religious and political controversies that rose around the issue. Choudhry also published two articles on Cadière last year, “A Betrayal of Trust: The Jesuits and Quietism in Eighteenth-Century France” in Common Knowledge, and “Gendered Models of Resistance: Jansenist Nuns and Unigenitus” in Historical Reflections.

Spring 2010 History Department Course Offerings

HIST 121: Readings in Modern European History
TR 1:30-2:45 and 3:10-4:25
Maria Höhn

HIST 122: Encounters in Modern East Asia
TR 12:00-1:15
Hiraku Shimoda

HIST 160: Readings in U. S. History
MW 9:00-10:15
Rebecca Edwards

HIST 174: Emergence of the Modern Middle East
WF 1:30-2:45
Joshua Schreier

HIST 215: High Middle Ages (950-1300)
TR 10:30-11:45
Nancy Bisaha

HIST 225: Renaissance Europe
TR 1:30-2:45
Nancy Bisaha

HIST 231: France and its “Others”
WF 12:00-1:15
Joshua Schreier

HIST 243: Rebirth of Russia 1917-Present
TR 4:35-5:50
Michaela Pohl

HIST 251: History of American Foreign Relations
MW 1:30-2:45
Robert Brigham

HIST 252: Modern South Asian History
TR 3:10-4:25
Julie Hughes

HIST 259: History of the Family in Early Modern Europe
TR 12:00-1:15
Mita Choudhry

HIST 260: Women in the U. S. to 1890
MW 1:30-2:45
Rebecca Edwards

HIST 267: African American History 1865-Present
TR 10:30-11:45 and 12:00-1:15
Quincy Mills

HIST 272: Modern African History Since 1800
MW 12:00-1:15
Ismail Rashid

HIST 275: Revolutionary America
MW 10:30-11:45
James Merrell

HIST 278: Cold War America
MW 10:30-11:45
Robert Brigham

HIST 332: Dangerous Ideas
W 1:00-3:00
Mita Choudhry

HIST 362: The Cuban Revolutions
T 3:10-5:10
Leslie Offutt

HIST 365: Race and the History of Jim Crow Segregation
M 1:00-3:00
Quincy Mills

HIST 366: American Encounters
T 1:00-3:00
James Merrell

HIST 367: Peoples and Environments in the American West
F 10:30-12:30
Rebecca Edwards

HIST 386: The Russian Orient
M 3:10-5:10
Michaela Pohl

HIST 387: Remembering War in East Asia
M 3:10-5:10
Hiraku Shimoda
Excuse us, professors, but we were wondering...

Ismail Rashid
Favorite band or musician? The Clash
If you could invite any historical figure to Thanksgiving dinner, who would it be? Toussaint L'Ouverture.
What is your favorite TV show? Star Trek—original, 2nd generation, and DS9.

Maria Höhn
Favorite band or musician? I love lots of different music from Rock n' roll to Jazz to Funk, to Country. My all time favorite singer is the German singer Reinhard Mey. I love his lyrics.
If you could take a course outside of the History Department, what would it be? Art History.
If you could invite any historical figure to Thanksgiving dinner, who would it be? Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Luxemburg.

Mita Choudhry
Where would you most like to travel to? Kashmir
If you could take a course outside of the History Department, what would it be? "Feminist Theory" and "Eighteenth-Century British Novel"
If you could invite any historical figure to Thanksgiving dinner, who would it be? Montaigne and Aphra Behn.

Robert Brigham
Favorite movie? The killing Fields
Favorite band or musician? Bruce Springsteen and U2.
What would you be if you weren't a history professor? International human rights lawyer.

Leslie Offutt
Where would you most like to travel to? Two categories: 1) places I've never been but would love to visit: the northern region of Spain, specifically the Basque region and La Rioja, or Vienna and Prague (because I'm fond of Mozart and LOVE Dvorak) 2) places I'd love to return to: Havana; Rio de Janeiro; Barcelona.
Favorite movie? Guantanamera.

Rebecca Edwards
Favorite band or musician? My 7-year-old, Ben, is big into The Police right now, so that's what I'm hearing the most! I'm especially fond of the group Crooked Stills.
What would your dream course be? Maybe a class on 19th-century America taught entirely through its novels and works of fiction.
Favorite historical novel? There are so many! Some recent favorites are Mari Sandoz, Cheyenne Autumn; the Patrick O'Brian series on the British navy; and Pat Barker's World War I trilogy that begins with Regeneration.

James Merrell
Favorite movie? Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.
Favorite historical novel? The Settled Factor by John Barth.
Where would you most like to travel to? Of the places I've been, I'd most like to return to England. Of the places I haven't, Ireland.

Hiraku Shimoda
Favorite movie? Perhaps I should give a more intellectual and sophisticated answer than this, but Jerry Maguire had me at hello.
If you could take a course outside of the History Department, what would it be? Something in studio art. Basic Drawing was the most transformative class I took at Vassar. It literally changed the way I view the physical world.
What would you be if you weren't a history professor? I've always wanted to be a ninja or a pirate. So maybe a pirate when on water and a ninja when on land?

Lydia Murdoch
Place you would most like to travel to? India.
If you could take a course outside of the History Department, what would it be? A physics class.
What would you be if you weren't a history professor? When I took a career test as a student in rural Virginia, I was told I was best suited to be a truck driver. I like to travel, to work independently, and to have long periods of solitary thought, although I think I prefer being a history professor.

Joshua Schreier
Favorite band or musician? The Clash
What would your dream course be? French Ideologies of Race and Empire
Where would you most like to travel to? Mali.
*Gulliver* is published by the History Department Majors Committee:

Alex Steele ’11
Lila Teeters ’11
Molly Kumar ’11
Amanda Waterhouse ’10
Ben Chase ’10
Sarah Matherly ’10
Morandi Hurst ’10, Department Intern

Please direct any questions or comments to mohurst@vassar.edu.