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Introduction: Finding Meaning in Life and History

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Introduction

Finding Meaning in Life and History

The Mission Statement of the College of the Holy Cross stipulates that “To participate in the life of Holy Cross is to accept an invitation to join in dialogue about basic human questions.” One of the core questions that the Mission Statement asks all members of the College community to consider is: “How do we find meaning in life and history?” This question is particularly relevant for those of us at Holy Cross who devote our time to the study of the past. As the name of this journal suggests, *Of Life and History* seeks to create a scholarly platform that allows students to more deeply engage in dialogues about the past. It invites members of the College community to participate in important intellectual discussions on the meanings and significance of prior human experiences.

For several years, Holy Cross History faculty and students have envisioned a journal such as *Of Life and History* as a forum for showcasing the diverse range of sophisticated historical research conducted by students at the College. The geographical and topical diversity of the essays in this inaugural issue represent a sample of the kind of historical scholarship conducted by Holy Cross students. Brett Cotter’s essay, for example, emerged from his work in the Weiss Summer Research Program, which enables students in all disciplines to engage in full-time independent research on self-designed projects. Catherine Griffin’s piece was inspired by her experience of living and studying in Strasbourg, France, through Holy Cross’ extensive yearlong study abroad program. My own essay represents the culmination of my research at the renowned American Antiquarian Society through Holy Cross’ collaboration with the Society and other area colleges for an annual American Studies Seminar. The remaining essays were written for upper-level seminar courses in the History Department. Beyond the scholarly ventures reflected within this issue, there are several additional and exciting historical projects underway within the History Department and at Holy Cross at large. Some of these include senior honors theses written by several students through the History Department’s rigorously structured Honors Program, research on the College’s own history through the Department’s recently founded History Lab, and the continuing expansion of the Digital Transgender Archive created by K.J. Rawson, Associate Professor of English. In future volumes of the journal, we hope to showcase these works as part of our goal to further expand the content of the *Of Life and History*.

Of Life and History has been some time in the making. Several years ago, Jessica Cormier ’16 and Professor Mary Conley (current History Department Chair) worked diligently to start a student-run journal. That inspiration, although it did not materialize at the time, reinvigorated our desire to produce a journal this year. Much of the credit for the existence of *Of Life and History* goes to Professor Sanjog

Rupakheti, who took a keen interest in reviving the project and subsequently shepherded it after he joined the Department in the fall of 2017. Professor Rupakheti has also served as a supportive and insightful advisor, helping to shape much of the journal's form and vision. Professor Conley and the rest of the History Department have also provided tremendous support for the journal by identifying and communicating with potential student contributors, graciously allowing us to publish the annual Wall Prize Essay, and funding the publication of this inaugural issue. The Department's Administrative Assistant, Yolanda Youtsey, has been incredibly helpful in coordinating the logistical aspects of the journal such as advertising and printing. We would like to extend special thanks to Lisa Villa '90, Digital Scholarship Librarian at Holy Cross, for helping us build the online presence for *Of Life and History* in the College's online repository.

Finally, and most importantly, *Of Life and History* was made possible through a great deal of interest and effort on the part of Holy Cross students. The journal would not have seen the light of the day without the generous and tireless work of its founding Editorial Board—Brett Cotter '19, Gabriella Grilla '19, Campbell Loeber '18, Julia Palmerino '18, and Emma Scally '18. They spent countless hours shaping a vision for the journal, reading through many submissions, and helping the authors revise their manuscripts. I am deeply indebted to each of them for their eagerness to work on the project and for their patience as we crafted and refined our operating procedures through much trial and error. We would also like to thank all those Holy Cross students who submitted their work for this year's issue. The large volume of submissions provided us with a sufficient pool of high-quality papers from which to select the essays printed on the following pages as well as the issue's beautiful artwork. We look forward to seeing similar enthusiasm for *Of Life and History* in the years to come.

Each of the essays in this inaugural issue of *Of Life and History* revolve around the themes of nationalism and national identity. Historical explorations of these issues raise crucial questions about the way nationalism shapes individual identity. As Catherine Griffin asks in her essay on nationalism in Alsace and Lorraine, "Who has the right to define national identity, citizenship, and who can identify who is a citizen and who is not, on what criteria?" The essays in the volume address these questions from different historical periods, places and paradigms. In the context of the rising tide of nationalism and national identity in our contemporary global political landscape, a nuanced and historical understanding of nationalism and national identity can enable us to both appreciate their community building power and trace their recently modern genesis.

By interrogating the constructed nature of all national identities and demystifying the naturalness often assigned to them, the essays in the volume help to reveal the dynamic, flexible, and often contradictory character of nationalism and

national identity. Ada Liu's cover art, for example, challenges the conventional narrative of colonial America that depicts Native Americans and European settlers as two rigidly separated groups divided by language, religion, and location. She instead shows a Christian Delaware interpreter whose identity incorporated aspects of both Delaware and European traditions. Similarly, Dimitri Savidis' essay explores the complex ways in which Palestinian Jews reconciled Zionist and Ottomanist identities in the early twentieth century. Likewise, Brett Cotter examines the ways in which Polish-American immigrants in a Northeastern American city negotiated their ethnic identity in their new home by preserving many traditional Polish practices and selectively incorporating new American ones. Emma Scally's essay delineates the evolution of Catholic Americans' responses to the first atomic bombs from initially divided opinions of the bomb itself to a more uniform anti-Communist stance.

Griffin's and Campbell Loeber's essays analyze the ways in which both individual and institutional actors have sought to control and employ nationalism to further specific political agendas. Griffin's essay assesses the French government's use of institutional systems to promote nationalism in Alsace and Lorraine following World War I. Loeber's piece focuses on the interplay between nationalism and historical memory, specifically the role artistic renderings of historical events have in the construction of national identity. She traces several portrayals of the American Revolution in Broadway plays over the course of the twentieth century to underscore the role of artwork and media in the dissemination of particular memory about the past. My own essay recounts the ways in which newspaper writers, business people, advertisers, and other commentators in one nineteenth American city managed local anxieties about the transition towards an urbanized industrial society by constructing an industrial identity for the city that aligned with the evolving American vision of the republican nation.

Taken together, these essays reveal both the newness of nationalism and its saliency in the formation of individual and community identity. In doing so, the essays in this volume demonstrate that an engaged study of the past helps us to remind ourselves of the uses, strengths, and limitations of nationalism and national identity.

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