

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

Newsletter No 9 – December 2022

Minor Peace and Conflict Studies

By John Hogan, coordinator of the programme

Since the last update for the PACS newsletter, the Minor in Peace and Conflict Studies programme has seen a number of changes, most obviously in terms of how our classes are being taught. To our delight, the 2022-23 academic year is the first, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when all of our classes are taking place entirely in person. While working online was a necessity for the last number of years, there is a consensus amongst our students and staff that teaching, learning and engaging with one another is far more rewarding and enjoyable on a face-to-face basis. There have also been some changes in terms of personnel. I am a relatively new addition to the Minor, having taken over programme



coordination duties in January of 2022 from Lenneke Sprik, who took up a new role as a lecturer in safety and security management at the NHL Stenden Hogeschool. Thanks to Lenneke's very well-prepared handover, as well as the commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers on the programme, the transition has been a smooth one! We were also very happy to welcome a new staff member to the PCS Minor this year in Marije Luitjens. Marije has worked in both the academic and policy worlds, with a focus on peacebuilding, resilience, transitional justice, social cohesion, and the rule of law. She has taken over 'Peace and Conflict: From Theory to Practice' from Nour Gjaltema, who recently took up a position as a policy officer in the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. Of course, we also welcomed new students, around 50 of whom joined the Minor programme this year. Having started in September, they are already deep into their study of the causes, consequences and solutions to violence from a variety of disciplinary perspectives,

including political science, philosophy, anthropology and law. Among that number, we have appointed four very capable student representatives in Jeffrey Alexander, Melina Flink, Rob Kooij and Begy Džinić. Below you can find a brief account of Jeffrey, Melina and Rob's experience of the Minor so far.



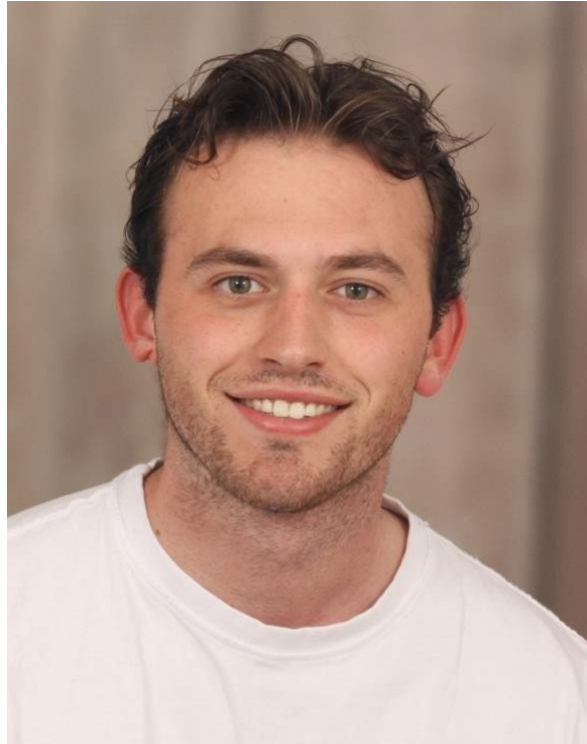
Melina Flink

“When trying to decide upon a minor, I was unsure whether to stay in my own field of law or explore something a bit different in the field of social science. Eventually, I chose Peace and Conflict studies to broaden my knowledge and perspective further. I have experiences of looking at conflicts and peace efforts from previous subjects, but the minor has allowed me to learn more specifically about the theories behind conflicts and eventually the practices towards peace.

The world is filled with conflicts, both violent and non-violent. This minor gave me the opportunity to discuss why humans turn to violence and conflicts, and what can be done to better our behaviour. We have been presented with the perspectives of both perpetrators and most importantly victims. The minor has also given us background on why certain conflicts have occurred, comparing the 'old world' with the 'new world' and past efforts to outlaw war, while also including perspectives from my own discipline in terms of existing laws during a conflict as well as after.

As an international student from Sweden, it's especially interesting to work in a group filled with people from different parts of the world (as the minor also includes exchange students). This allows for multiple perspectives on the important topic of peace and conflict studies and inspires young people to possibly work further in that specific field. After all, one must understand the reasons, causes and opinions behind a conflict to understand it and consequently solve it. As such, enrolling in this minor is a great start and gives a clear background on what's to come in the ever-developing field of peace and conflict studies.”

“The subjects that I have studied prior to this academic year, in the field of health sciences, is different from the topics that come along in the Peace and Conflict studies minor. At first, I thought: 'Is studying issues from such a different academic field something that could hold me back during this minor?' However, this didn't turn out to be such an issue. The literature, combined with the lectures and enthusiastic professors answering all our questions, has provided us with enough information to understand the courses well. As a result, there haven't been any moments where I have been lost or distraught in trying to learn about these different subjects! My choice of this minor was mainly informed by an interest in the topics covered.



Rob Kooij

Specifically, the minor gives you insights into a variety of topics that deal with the origins of violence and how it can be managed. We cover subjects such as philosophy, ethics, international law, but also more practice-based subjects such as peacebuilding. To my surprise, I find subjects like international law very interesting, especially the history behind it. To date, I am really enjoying the minor, and understanding more what is happening in the world while also learning that there is still a lot to do. I am curious to see what the next few months bring and what I may learn during the minor.”



Jeffrey Alexander

„In choosing the Minor in Peace and Conflict Studies, I joined a new field of academic study that differed from my own background in history. Even though there are differences in faculty and methods, there are many similarities in the topics broadly. The minor is interdisciplinary and has a lot of common ground with other fields of study, such as philosophy, political science and anthropology.

Through my history studies up to now, I have already learned about some of the conflicts that we cover in the Peace and Conflict minor. However, within the minor you actually look at the theories and causes of such global conflicts. In addition, you address current ethical questions. It's allowing me to understand why these conflicts began in the first place. It seems that I am gaining more knowledge through this minor, as well as a broader view of conflicts in society. Furthermore, the excursions, such as the one to the ICC in The Hague, also help colour and give life to the theories you learn in the minor."

Steven Pinker on Human Nature and the Future of War

By Lourdes Melese

On 10 October 2022 VU Amsterdam had the honour of hosting a talk on the future of war by world-renowned Harvard scholar Steven Pinker. Organized by the VU Centre of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) and sponsored by the VuVereniging, the talk was initially planned for 2020 but postponed by a year twice due to Covid. With his world-wide bestselling book "The Better Angels of Nature" Pinker has significantly contributed to the contemporary debate on the decline of violence and other trends in modern warfare. Over a decade after its publication Pinker provided us with his thoughts on some of the arguments made in the book on the general decline of war. More specifically, the talk was a reflection on the question of whether the Long Peace may be on the way to its end since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In "The Better Angels of Nature" Pinker names the Long Peace and the Decline of War as the result of numerous processes, such as the rise of democracy, the growth of global and regional organization as well as the world-wide outlawing of war and the general acceptance of norms against conquest.



These processes have prevented the frequent occurrence of war, compared to pre 1945. Pinker argues that Putin's war has definitely posed a threat to the Long Peace. Nevertheless, he states that this might not mean a the reverse of the Long Peace and the return of constant wars and conquest, namely because Putin has thus far not achieved significant success. Hence, there is a likelihood of the survival of the current norms and attitudes against war – Indeed, "over the course of history, institutions & norms increasingly bring out our Better Angels".

If you are interested in watching the full recording of the talk, it is available on the PACS page or via the following link: <https://youtu.be/ktXJyE4NrZ8>

Establishing a Dutch Peace and Conflict Studies Network

Over the past year, PACS has been involved in establishing a country-wide network in peace and conflict studies, hosted by the interfaculty research institute Globalisation Studies Groningen and coordinated by a team of scholars from Nijmegen, Utrecht, Leiden, Groningen, the Dutch Defense Academy, the NHL Stenden and the Stichting Vredeswetenschappen.



At the inaugural meeting in Groningen with Rosanne Anholt (RU); Steven van Bockstael (UG); Monica den Boer (NLDA); Michel Bravo (SVW); Jesse Crane-Seeber (UG); Jolle Demmers (UU); Isabelle Duyvensteyn (UL); Ed Dumrese (Slot Loevesteijn); Nour Gjaltema (VU); Sanne Groothuis (VU); Annabelle de Heus (NHL Stenden); Magdalena König (UG); Nico Schrijver (Em. UL); Ingrid Sennema (UG); Lenneke Sprik (NHL Stenden); Wolfgang Wagner (VU); Jaap de Wilde (UG); Erin Wilson (UG).

The Peace and Conflict Studies Network has set itself the following concrete objectives:

- To support PhD students in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies by developing tailor-made education and training
- To facilitate collaboration between the existing educational programmes in Peace and Conflict Studies and organize additional seminars and/or summer schools
- To create a knowledge platform for societal use (e.g. for media, practitioners, professionals, NGOs)
- To facilitate cooperation in research (e.g. for the Nationale Wetenschapsagenda)
- To make Dutch Peace and Conflict Studies visible at an international level by reaching out to similar national networks.

A first winter school will take place between 22 and 28 January 2022 at the University of Groningen (for a program and practical information see [here](#)).

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](#).