

## Q&A with Ethan Cohen, Inaugural Immerman Awardee!



Ethan Cohen is currently a second-year history PhD student at Temple University, and the inaugural recipient of the new Richard Immerman Research Award (named after one of CENFAD's co-founders and former directors), with amounts up to \$1,500 given to students whose research projects are congruent with the mission of CENFAD. In this print-exclusive feature, I speak with Ethan about the prize and the research project that it has helped to support in his case.



**Casey VanSise:** Congratulations on being the inaugural recipient of the Richard Immerman Research Award for the 2021-22 academic year! How have you applied the funds that you procured from this award toward your own recent research endeavors?

**Ethan Cohen:** I had the privilege of visiting the archives of Purdue University for a whole week. The staff there were outstandingly organized, knowledgeable,

and informative, and they were generous about my lack of archival knowhow, this being my second-ever archival trip. They showed me the "snakes," "book cradles," and other tools that archivists use to keep old materials sound. I read through more than twenty boxes of material from around 1905-1955 relating to global aviation. Spain and Morocco are my focus, and I found collections of aviation stamps from those countries. But much of the material, even the many documents left by Americans, helped clarify my sense of a *global culture of aviation*. I knew there was a relationship between aviation and colonialism, but I did not realize its extent. From the photographs, scribbled notes, and telegrams by American and British aviators, mostly women, I learned that Africa and Asia provided essential refueling stops, first of all. More importantly, the white aviators both relied on African and Asian labor of and made a theatre out of using it. They visited British, American, French, Italian, and Dutch colonies both for fuel and for performance. Also, aviators like Amelia Earhart were quite literally charting new territory by establishing air routes, say, from California to Java for American and Dutch businesspeople. By mobilizing their talents to advance colonialism, Earhart and other women achieved relative parity with male aviators among their social scene.

**CV:** Are you engaged in any ongoing projects that have also benefitted from being a recipient of the Immerman Award?

**EC:** I must answer first that I am certainly thankful to Professor Richard Immerman for

co-creating and bestowing his name onto this award. I owe Immerman a debt for teaching through his scholarship how to open up the history of one country by both zooming out and looking beneath into the international and transnational dimensions that make the story make sense. His scholarship also shines light on the rhythm of intra- and inter-national power struggles happening at the same time. This is important instruction for me, especially since Spaniards and Moroccans both participated on both sides of the Spanish-Moroccan wars. I am equally grateful to the donors to this prize endowment, whose large contributions, for example, made possible my relatively lengthy research sojourn in Indiana. The research that CENFAD funding has propelled is adding up to what I hope will be my first published article. As of now, it revolves on two themes: colonial and anti-colonial struggles over the airplane as a symbol of modernity, and colonial feminism. I will show that Spaniards and Moroccans, not unlike their neighbors around the world, felt a pressing need to prove to their possible followers that the state they planned to build—whether the Republic of the Rif or the Spanish Protectorate—would be the most modern. They used machines like airplanes and radio for theatrical value as much as logistical. It may even be that the theatrics were more impactful, for I find as much evidence of aerial warfare failing as of its success in 1920s Morocco. Colonial feminism is an essential part of this story because the Spaniards – ongoing Arabic study will eventually enable me to think on Moroccan women in this – could not have built their empire without women (again, not unlike their global neighbors). Spanish women writers, for example, who coupled their campaigns for suffrage with pro-colonial propaganda, used gender politics to affect public opinion in favor of colonialism as

both traditional and modern. Nurses who brought domestic work into the ugliest North African war zones and wrote about it were tantamount in repackaging such contradictions for their political gain as white women. And what of the Spanish women aviators of the 1930s? Further research will tell! If this article does its job right, it will appreciate "modernity" not as stuffy jargon but through the understandings of the historical actors, and it will welcome seeming contradictions like colonial feminists' union of tradition and modernity.

**CV:** In addition to receiving the Immerman Award for 2021-22, you were also a recipient of the Jeffrey Bower Endowed Research Fellowship for the 2020-21 academic year, given to students who incorporate a study of technology into their work (congratulations on that achievement as well!). How did you or have you benefit[ted] from that?

**EC:** Both the Immerman and the Bower awards are supporting archival research for this same project. I am currently scheduling a visit to Princeton. Unfortunately, NYU, Yale, and Columbia are still closed to outsiders (even alumni) due to the pandemic, so I cannot yet see those rich documents. But the larger point is that CENFAD has made possible some thrilling and useful research within the United States while many institutions remain closed and brief travel to the Mediterranean is almost impossible. CENFAD truly allowed me to make the most of my time as a researcher during a pandemic.

**CV:** Given your experiences with these two CENFAD awards, are you encouraged to apply for other CENFAD awards in the future? Do you have any personal or general advice for future applicants of the awards that you received, or even just things that

***Strategic Visions: Volume 21, Number I***

you appreciated from your experiences with either or both awards that have not already been brought up?

**EC:** Professor Bryant Simon says, "Apply for everything." But even if I were selective with my grant applications, I would still apply to CENFAD every time. These awards' emphasis on the relationship between technology and interstate relations is directly reflected in my study of the conflict between imperial Spain and the Republic of the Rif over technological symbols of modernity. Also, I always lean cultural, so conversations with CENFAD faculty like Professor McPherson help deepen my sense of the more materially measurable military and diplomatic history (and its literature) happening at the same time. Reading diplomatic histories like Immerman's remind me that notwithstanding the great power of theatrics and gender politics, much of this twentieth century history hinges on money, assassinations, and sheer physical force. I seek to balance these poles in my writing as many role models at Temple do.