Subversive Networks
Actors of Change in International Organizations, 1920-1960

International Conference
Thursday 4 – Saturday 6 December, 2014
At the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”, Heidelberg University
Karl-Jaspers-Centre, Voßstr. 2, Building 4400, Heidelberg

In his book on “Global Community”, Akira Iriye emphasizes the subversive role international organizations played in reshaping the world order in the 20th century. He argues that these organizations fostered structures and networks which proved to be powerful and stable enough to influence, and survive, the global reconfigurations caused by decolonization. The period between 1920 and 1960 saw wide-ranging shifts in the international system caused by war, reconstruction, decolonization and nation-building. The world order seemed renegotiable and was inspired by the global ideologies and utopic designs flourishing in this time. International organizations provided platforms where different visions of world order clashed and where transnational activism challenged the supremacy of nations. Connecting national diplomats, experts and civil society lobbyists from all over the world, international organizations transformed the former system of nation-state driven, western dominated diplomacy. They paved the way for a more inclusive form of international relations, the empowerment of new agents and the evasion of established power structures.

This conference argues that due to their network-like character, international organizations, namely the United Nations system and its predecessor, the League of Nations, can be considered as vehicles of change. The panels put special emphasis on agents and groups that tried to change world politics from below in times of transition. How far did they use international organizations to promote their interest and to challenge existing hierarchies? What were the nature and potential of networked interests, agendas, and movements? How did international organizations enable change and how did they themselves respond to change?

The conference aims to bring together historians as well as researches from social sciences and related disciplines with an interest in the history of internationalism. A common goal, however, is to challenge the former euro-centric and state-focused diplomatic history in favor of a global history of international organizations which considers border-crossing entanglements and transnational networks.