

Research Description:

Alex Chase-Levenson is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests include borders and boundaries in nineteenth-century Europe, the history of medicine, histories of liberalism, reform, and public health, and the history of museums and display. His published work has addressed trade, travel, and disease in the nineteenth-century Mediterranean, Victorian spectacle, and perceptions of ancient time in nineteenth-century Britain and France.

Job Talk Abstract:

A Sanitary Cordon and a British Outlier?: Mediterranean Quarantine, 1815-1850.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, every trader, tourist, missionary, or soldier returning to Western Europe from the Ottoman Empire or North Africa was required to spend several weeks in quarantine. Every letter was dipped in vinegar, every bale of cotton fumigated. Unsurprisingly, the quarantine system generated a diverse set of detractors, especially in free-trading Britain. It suited such critics to cast quarantine in opposition to the ostensibly British ideals of free movement, free inquiry, and free trade. “Quarantine ought never to exist in a free country,” wrote the young doctor Charles Meryon in 1845, “neither ought passports.” Both institutions, he suggested, reeked of Continental “despotism.”

Unconsciously echoing Meryon, recent historians have cast Britain as a reluctant quarantining power. In this talk, however, I argue that, in fact, Britons accommodated themselves to quarantine just as other nations did, and that British consuls and colonial officials throughout the Mediterranean practised quarantine diplomacy that kept Britain (mostly) on the right side of the *cordon sanitaire*. Mediterranean quarantine practice not only shaped the development of public health reform in Britain itself, I argue, it also tied Britain into a Europe-wide biopolity. Because of the quarantine system, fear of the plague undergirded a barrier between West and East that was both imaginative and tangible, but it also drew Western powers together well into the modern period.