This year, I was fortunate enough to receive a research grant from the Society for the Study of French History, allowing me to spend five weeks in Aix-en-Provence conducting research at the Archives nationales d’outre-mer. Part of Oxford’s Globalising and Localising the Great War network, my DPhil project emerges out of the global turn in First World War studies, comparing the impact of military service in the First World War on ideas of citizenship in Britain and France’s Caribbean colonies. The islands in question ultimately followed quite different political trajectories: on the one hand towards assimilation as overseas departments, and on the other towards independence. My research seeks to understand the war’s role in this process and, in doing so, to bring an often-overlooked region back into conversation with narratives of decolonisation.

Having spent three months in Paris consulting newspaper sources and military records for Martinique and Guadeloupe, I arrived in Aix with a number of obvious leads to follow. The expansive report of the Le Conte Commission (1924-5), for example, deals directly with the question of administrative reform, collating local responses on whether the islands should become overseas departments, or else be united under a governor-general in some form of federal scheme. Aix is also home to the surviving records of the representative committees which, from the early 1930s onwards, acted as a conduit between the colonial authorities and the islands’ fractious veterans’ associations. These provide crucial details on the main figures in the veterans’ movements, and on the relationship between the French state and its colonial ex-servicemen.

I was, however, also keen to range widely within the archive, chasing up isolated scraps of evidence which I hoped might shed light on both the global and intensely local dimensions of the project. Police surveillance records, for example, turned up French West Indian veterans among the leadership of the Communist-backed Union Intercoloniale in Paris alongside a young Ho Chi Minh. At the other end of the spectrum, leafing through a box of appeals against death sentences from across the empire took me to the hamlet of Macédoine in Martinique. Here, a tragic case of infanticide involving a war widow terrified of losing her pension provided a rare insight into working-class women’s experiences of the war and its aftermath. The challenge of the thesis will, of course, be to knit such disparate stories together into a coherent whole; it is, however, a challenge I am grateful to have.

I would like to thank the Society for their generosity in making this trip possible.