

[H-Diplo Article Review 1148- Threlkeld on Rietzler, "U.S. Foreign Policy Think Tanks and Women's Intellectual Labor"](#)

Discussion published by christopher ball on Thursday, December 1, 2022

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1148

1 December 2022

Katharina Rietzler. "U.S. Foreign Policy Think Tanks and Women's Intellectual Labor, 1920-1950." *Diplomatic History* 46:3 (2022): 575-601. DOI: doi:10.1093/dh/dhac015.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1148>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Megan Threlkeld, Denison University

Katharina Rietzler draws our attention to women's work—both paid and unpaid—for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Foreign Policy Association (FPA), both of which are based in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, for the British Royal Institute of International Affairs. She encourages us to adopt 'intellectual labor' as an analytical category to better capture the range of work that went into nongovernmental efforts to shape foreign policy. Doing so reveals the myriad contributions of women, even within organizations like the CFR that refused to admit women members until the 1960s.^[1] Behind the scenes at the CFR, women worked as librarians, bibliographers, and news clippers, curating information in multiple languages to be shared with both policy makers and the American public. Women took center stage at the FPA, meanwhile, playing leadership roles within the organization and writing and speaking publicly as part of campaigns to educate the American public on foreign policy issues. And on both sides of the Atlantic, women performed the same kind of emotional and cultural labor women have been doing for centuries—organizing social events, serving as hostesses, and facilitating interactions among male diplomats.^[2] Expanding our conception of intellectual labor to encompass all of these activities, Rietzler argues, illuminates the extent to which women's work underpinned the male-dominated world of US foreign policy.^[3]

Library and information work, for example, were integral to both the CFR and the FPA because foreign policy making in a democracy demanded an informed public (585-586). Documentation practices, including news clipping, bibliographic work, and editing anthologies and collections of primary sources for publication, as well as original policy

analysis, comprised the bulk of the material created for public education efforts. The professional librarians and researchers who dominated this work in the 1920s were mostly women, and think tanks provided them an opportunity to exercise their talents. By 1929 seven of the nine people in the FPA's Research Department were women, and the association had created a new library and a "highly effective publishing empire" (592). In the 1930s, the CFR hired the highly-educated and experienced librarian Ruth Savord to revamp and coordinate the council's research efforts. Such work, according to Rietzler, "represented the heights of what it was possible to achieve intellectually for a woman of a certain social status, structured by race and class, in the world of U.S. liberal internationalism" (592).

Rietzler also provides more intimate intellectual portraits of two prominent 'think tank women,' Vera Micheles Dean and Ellen Hammer. Both played important roles in helping the FPA and the CFR, respectively, to produce and distribute information on US foreign affairs. As head of the FPA's research department throughout the late 1930s and most of the 1940s, Dean in particular became an important voice in the post-World War II planning process, advocating for an international organization undergirded by principles of collective security. Hammer, for her part, helped the CFR survey public opinion and subsequently expand its public outreach in the immediate postwar period. Rietzler argues that along with the efforts of Savord in the 1930s, Hammer's work, proves that "the world of U.S. foreign policy think tanks was never as hostile to women as official accounts of the CFR claimed" (600).

"Who counts as a foreign policy intellectual" (576)? I love this question, which runs through not only this article but much of Rietzler's recent work as Co-Director of the Leverhulme Research Project on Women and the History of International Thought and co-editor of

Women's International Thought: A New History.^[4] So many avenues of inquiry open up when we expand our conception of intellectual labor and the varieties of work that go into foreign policy-making. A question like this also, as Rietzler points out, moves us beyond well-known women like Vera Dean or politician and ambassador Clare Boothe Luce and brings other women to the fore, especially those with advanced degrees in political science, economics, international relations, and other fields who chose to dedicate themselves to vital work for which they received little recognition.

I also find tremendously useful Rietzler's typology of women's think-tank labor. She distinguishes what she calls "engine room" work (578), particularly documentation; interpersonal labor; and public writing and speaking. These types often overlapped, of course, but they demarcate and help us as historians articulate the different kinds of work women performed.

In the end this article is not just a valuable contribution to the history of think tanks and foreign-policy making. It is also a call to question gendered assumptions about what 'counts'

as intellectual work and intellectual history—to examine traditional sources in a different light and look beyond them to root out the contributions of marginalized historical actors and tell more complete and accurate stories about the past.

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[1]

— Studies of the CFR that overlook or marginalize women staffers include Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Peter Grose, *Continuing the Inquiry: the Council on Foreign Relations from 1921 to 1996* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996); Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[2]

— Compelling examples of this work include Molly M. Wood, “Wives, Clerks, and ‘Lady Diplomats’: The Gendered Politics of Diplomacy and Representation in the U.S. Foreign Service, 1900-1940,” *European Journal of American Studies* 10:1 (2015); Molly M. Wood, “The Politics of Domesticity and the ‘Social Game’ in the U.S. Foreign Service, 1905-1941,” *Journal of Women’s History* 17:2 (2005); Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000);

[3]

— Here Rietzler builds on previous studies such as Philip Nash, *Breaking Protocol: America’s First Female Ambassadors, 1933-1964* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020); Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women as Foreign Policy Leaders: National Security and Gender Politics in Superpower America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Beatrice McKenzie, “The Problem of Women in the Department: Sex and Gender Discrimination in the 1960s United States Foreign Diplomatic Service,” *European Journal of American Studies* 10:1 (2015); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Changing Differences: Women and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy, 1917-1994* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995)

[4]

— Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, eds., *Women’s International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).