

[H-Diplo Essay 503- Isabel V. Hull on Learning the Scholar's Craft](#)

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H-Diplo ESSAY 503

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"Back to Square One."

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Essay by Isabel V. Hull, Cornell University, Emerita

The H-Diplo editors have asked about the "formative years" of scholars' interest in international affairs. I honestly don't know where it all started. I was a nerdy kid interested in history, natural and (I guess) unnatural, and politics very early on. I was an avid reader of *Time*, despite its "strange inverted *Timestyle*" ("Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind," "Where it all will end, knows God.").^[1] In middle school, exploration of my parents' library yielded long-lasting results. Konrad Heiden's *Der Fuehrer* made Germany the most fascinating place on earth (it still is), while Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* is responsible for a life-long obsession with the First World War. In high school, where I was finally allowed to learn German, George Thayer's *The Farther Shores of [American] Politics* (unfortunately, they have moved farther still) and George Mosse's *The Crisis in German Ideology* reflected a preoccupation with insane political movements of the right.^[2]

At the University of Michigan, I did study international relations with A.F.K. Organski in political science, and Bradford Perkins (US history), but not with my honors advisor, Gerhard L. Weinberg, the specialist in National Socialist foreign policy. Gerhard was teaching domestic policy, instead; he suggested I write my senior thesis on the Ludendorff Movement (Bund Gotterkenntnis Ludendorff) whose materials he had collected at the library. I looked at these and reported back to Prof. Weinberg that I could read Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist, but *Michael Kohlhaas* had not prepared me for Mathilde Ludendorff. What was one to make of sentences like: "So lehrte uns unsere neue Moral des Daseinskampfes an Stelle der summarischen Tugenderhebung von Arbeit und Fleiß, Ordnung und Zeiteinteilung ein elektives Werten, ein Abwägen des Einzelfalles an den

Wünschen der Genialität”?^[3] And what did “Gotterkenntnis” mean, anyway? Gerhard said I should just keep at it and it would clear up of itself. And so I found myself with a handful of others in the Rare Book Room as sirens blared and the Ann Arbor fire department thumped up the stairs to extinguish fires on the upper floors set, apparently, by protesters. We all continued with our work. In the end, I concluded that a certain degree of murkiness was the essence of the Ludendorff Bewegung.

Yale University was the only place on the planet with three specialists in Weimar Germany: Hans W. Gatzke, Peter Gay, and Henry A. Turner, Jr. I went to New Haven determined to continue studying domestic political movements to the right of the Nazis. After months of labor, I discovered a recent dissertation on that topic. Crestfallen, I went to my advisor, Hans, and asked what I should do. He said he wouldn’t tell me, because, “you never listen to me, anyway.” This was not true; it was just that I never listened *at the time*—in fact, I’ve never forgotten Hans’s words; they are ringing in my ear as I write this.

And so, in the perfect place to study Weimar, I reverted to the Wilhelminian era and to an essay I had written trying to figure out why the contemporary criticism of Kaiser Wilhelm II focused so often on matters (homo)sexual. This seemed intriguing not simply because I was gay, but more so because the criticism was so tangential to what was really ruining the Kaiserreich’s politics, and yet it seemed so convincing to *Zeitgenossen*. But the history of sexual politics was slightly before its time and the history of monarchy struck most younger historians as passé. Except for John C.G. Röhl (Sussex), who was a great support, few cared how monarchy worked, or didn’t. Nevertheless, there was tremendous material on the subject among private papers. It took two years in the archives to get through it all.

When *The Entourage* book was finished,^[4] the original question still remained: why was sexuality such a potent organizer of political speech and understanding? Researching that question led to fifteen happy years in the early modern period. The greatest challenge was finding documentation; sexual behavior is everywhere and no place. Archivists would reply that they had no material, when, of course, once you could root around, you discovered it throughout the legal and political records. As I left the Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe after a long stint, Herr Rupp said to me, “Ah, Frau Hull, I’m sorry to see you go; you order such interesting documents!”

I would probably have stayed in the early modern period except for David Sabeen (my pal in the field, who left Cornell for UCLA—we had planned a collaborative project on law in the Holy Roman Empire) and Hannah Arendt, who inexplicably left out the actual mechanism linking imperialism and totalitarianism in *Origins of Totalitarianism*.^[5] My efforts to discover that link led me to German Southwest Africa, the battle of Waterberg, and from there back to its origins in Germany, the Schlieffen Plan, and finally to Imperial Germany’s

larger military culture. The resulting book, *Absolute Destruction*, turned out not to be about totalitarianism after all, but about smaller logics of organization with large, lethal effects.^[6]

Military culture is about how armies wage war. But how do states set the rules and why do they actually abide by them? When do they abandon them, and why? I thought I might efficiently research these questions by comparing the greatest naval power (Great Britain) with the greatest land power (Imperial Germany) in World War I. I began in the Public Record Office at Kew where I discovered the best document ever. It is in the entry-way to the reading room: the Foreign Office card index where the diplomats rubricized their activity after 1908. It instantly revealed that international law was everywhere in Britain's diplomacy and conduct of the war. It was also clear that sea law versus land law and common law versus continental law were complicating factors that one could not handle "efficiently." So, I slowed down, widened the search to include France, another continental-law nation as a fit comparison to Germany, and then followed the contemporary arguments.

It was only after *Scrap of Paper*^[7] was published, as I worked in the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, that I finally discovered what I should have done in the first place: compare Imperial Germany to its ally, Austria-Hungary. For Berlin and Vienna were two allies "separated by a common language" and also by a significantly different view of international law.

International law has continued to grip me; it suffuses all relations among states, yet it is hard to pin down or to see exactly how it operates. The lawyers mostly stick to doctrine (writings, not practice), the political scientists often deny it altogether, the (very good) centennial literature on the outbreak of World War I mostly passed over it in silence. The excellent recent account by Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*, began from the widely held view that the right of states to go to war was unlimited until *after* 1919.^[8] My reading of the nineteenth century, and of the July Crisis that ended it, is quite different. The post-1815 period seems to me to be of a piece, characterized by strong customary limits to state bellicosity in Europe as they defined it. But the long nineteenth century is a maze of diplomatic complexity and prolix documentation. Matthias Schulz's wonderful *Normen und Praxis: Das Europäische Konzert der Grossmächte als Sicherheitsrat, 1815-1860* in fact devotes most of its 652 pages to a single decade.^[9] And this is as it should be, if one wants to uncover the workings of custom, whose native language is detail, inexact repetition, subliminal expectation, and good-enough compromise.

So, as the field of diplomatic history moves in a cultural direction focused particularly on the too-long neglected motors of gender and imperialism/racism, I find myself at the end of my career back at square one, doing old-fashioned diplomatic history, in Europe, no less. I'm

reading the documents and letters one by one, closely, between the lines, trying to discover the hidden assumptions of custom that guided diplomacy and decision making as the long nineteenth century ended. What, exactly, did Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Count Berchtold understand when he claimed “Abwehr” (defense) or characterized the monarchy’s use of military force as “defensive”? When his ally, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Count San Giuliano contradicted him: launching a war on that basis in that context (July 1913) would be “an offensive action” for which Austria would bear “the complete responsibility before Europe and history,” did he mean “state responsibility” in the legal sense?^[10] Provoked by the Balkan Wars, the putative sleepwalkers of 1914 had spent the preceding two years deliberating in astonishing detail the exact circumstances under which “Europe,” as the Great Powers called themselves, would accept as legitimate a continental war.

Square one is not a bad place to be, it is fun and exhilarating, but it can also get discouraging. So many documents, so much to learn, so many areas of abiding controversy. I am often comforted by George (Mosse)’s wise remark that “you can’t know everything.” Still, I am sure that most historians and especially graduate students find themselves feeling similarly worn down at times. My advice would be to stick with it—but then, you never listen to me, anyway.

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^[1] Wolcott Gibbs, “Time... Fortune... Life...Luce,” in *More in Sorrow*, Wolcott Gibbs (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1958), 3-19, here 8, 19 (orig. *The New Yorker* (28 November 1936), 20-25).

^[2] Konrad Heiden, Ralph Manheim, and Norbert Guterman, *Der Fuehrer; Hitler’s Rise to Power* (London,: V. Gollancz Ltd., 1944); Barbara W. (Barbara Wertheim) Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York,: Macmillan, 1962); George Thayer, *The Farther Shores of Politics; the American Political Fringe Today* (New York,: Simon and Schuster, 1967); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology; Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York,: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

^[3] Mathilde von Kemnitz Ludendorff, *Triumph Des Unsterblichkeitwillens* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1922), 289.

^[4] Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[5] _____ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: World Publishing Co, 1951).

[6] _____ Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[7] _____ Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law During the Great War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[8] _____ Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (London: Penguin, 2017).

[9] _____ Matthias Schulz, *Normen und Praxis: Das Europäische Konzert der Grossmächte als Sicherheitsrat, 1815-1860* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2009).

[10] _____ These quotations from Ministry of Foreign Affairs Austria-Hungary, *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 Bis Zum Kriegsausbruch 1914*, eds., Ludwig Bittner, Alfred Francis Pribram, and Heinrich Srbik, and Hans Uebersberger (Vienna: Leipzig, Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1930), Vol. 6, document 7612, 7747, 7748, and Vol. 7, doc. 8157.