Cloy on Olmstead, 'The United States' Entry into the First World War: The Role of British and German Diplomacy'

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After two and a half years of maintaining a nonmilitant status as World War I raged across the European continent, the United States broke its neutrality and joined the war in April 1917. A pivotal moment in US history, the nation’s entry into World War I has generated an extensive collection of studies analyzing the circumstances that precipitated US intervention. In The United States’ Entry into the First World War: The Role of British and German Diplomacy, Justin Quinn Olmstead offers an innovative argument to the historiography by positing that British and German diplomacy played a determining role in the United States’ involvement in World War I. Rather than placing emphasis on US public opinion, Wilsonian statecraft, or domestic concerns, as previous studies have done, Olmstead asserts that there is a direct link between the formation of US policies during the war and the nation’s diplomatic relations with Britain and Germany.[1] By exploring key points of intersection between the United States, Britain, and Germany, such as the British blockade, unrestricted submarine warfare, and the Zimmerman telegram, Olmstead enters well-trodden academic territory, but he distinguishes himself by situating the events outside of their immediate context and into the broader context of diplomatic relations.

Olmstead divides his work into five thematic chapters. The cornerstone of his argument takes shape in the first chapter, where he traces the tradition of conciliation and friendship that Britain and Germany attempted to cultivate with the United States in the decades prior to World War I. The following chapters hinge on this paradigm of diplomatic practice as Olmstead sets out to prove that the same traditions of diplomacy that existed before the war continued to influence the nations’ interactions after the war began. In the second chapter, he addresses the British blockade of Germany and the ways the British government worked to appease the United States’ disputes to the blockade. The third chapter shifts to Germany’s implementation of unrestricted submarine warfare and the German government’s efforts to diffuse American objections in the face of disasters like the sinking of the Lusitania. In the fourth chapter, Olmstead examines how Britain and Germany used nominal peace overtures to bolster the support of the United States. He ends with a chapter on the infamous Zimmerman telegram, which he characterizes not as a diplomatic blunder but as a justifiable maneuver based on the previous history of German, US, and Mexican relations.

The United States’ Entry into the First World War provides a cogently argued, well-organized analysis of US, British, and German diplomacy during World War I. Olmstead deals with the intricate labyrinth of foreign relations with skill, forging a unique perspective on the factors that contributed to US
policymaking during the war. He instills the British and German diplomats, like Sir Edward Grey, Sir Cecil Spring Rice, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, and Gottlieb von Jagow, with agency, presenting them as rational thinkers who undertook the difficult task of defending their nation’s controversial tactics while simultaneously attempting to preserve their relationship with the United States. Though the United States eventually entered the war on the side of the British, Olmstead is quick to emphasize that both Britain and Germany achieved diplomatic success—Britain in persuading the United States to join the war and Germany in sustaining US neutrality for two and a half years.

What readers will find missing in Olmstead’s account is the agency of the US government itself. The US officials, namely, Woodrow Wilson and his advisor Colonel Edward House, tend to appear as inexperienced, passive recipients of British and German diplomatic strategies, unwittingly coerced into decisions that profited their foreign counterparts. Olmstead does not consider, for instance, why US leaders might have supported neutrality or entered the war for their own purposes, for reasons unrelated to external influence. While Olmstead deftly constructs two sides of the diplomatic triangle, he lessens the extent of his argument by leaving the third underdeveloped.

This absence of content does not detract from the overall legitimacy of Olmstead’s work. Olmstead’s study reflects a sturdy scholarly infrastructure, undergirded by a thorough base of primary and secondary sources. Befitting the diplomatic focus of his work, Olmstead centers his attention on government-related documents from US, German, and British national archives, including official records, letters, memoranda, and the personal papers of pertinent officials. Olmstead also demonstrates a firm grasp on the secondary scholarship, highlighting key historiographical themes throughout his work and responding to the issues with his own assessments. An instructive review of the primary and secondary source material appears in a bibliographical essay at the end of the book, particularly beneficial for those unfamiliar with the topic or planning to undertake research on a similar subject.

Amid a wide-ranging body of work on US involvement in World War I, Olmstead’s book supplies a fresh angle of exploration, predicated not on a series of individual events but on an underlying network of diplomacy that coursed through international relations. Those interested in US diplomatic history or the factors that influenced the United States to enter World War I will find the book especially relevant. A study aptly timed to coincide with the 2018 centenary of the end of World War I, The United States’ Entry into the First World War adds complexity to the conversation surrounding what prompted the United States to join the war.

Note

