

2015

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Essay No. 126

An H-Diplo State of the Field Essay

Published on 10 April 2015

H-Diplo Essay Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

“The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History”¹

URL: <http://tiny.cc/E126>

Essay by William R. Keylor, Boston University

When the editors of H-Diplo asked me to write an essay on the “state of the field” for this list, they included with the invitation a link to an article that Marc Trachtenberg had written on the same subject for e-International Relations and was later published on H-Diplo.² On reading Trachtenberg’s piece I found myself agreeing with most of what he had to say on the subject. So in order to avoid a tedious repetition of the points made in his excellent article, I asked, and was granted permission, to approach the topic from a slightly different angle: that of a latecomer to the sub-discipline of diplomatic history from another corner of the historical profession. While Trachtenberg’s article mainly deals with the present and future state of the profession, I concentrate on the transformation of the profession in the past four decades or so.

Unlike most of the academic members of this list, I was trained in graduate school not in American diplomatic history but rather in the history of European thought and culture, with particular emphasis on France. After receiving my doctorate from Columbia University, I joined the history department at Boston University to teach modern European history in general, and modern French history in particular. In the meantime I

¹ This is a radically expanded and revised version of remarks I presented to the International Security Studies Program at Yale University and to the Sorbonne course of Professor Georges-Henri Soutou. In addition to my gratitude to many people in those audiences for their comments, I want to express my appreciation to my friend, colleague, and neighbor David Mayers for recently reading the penultimate version of this piece and offering his usual constructive criticism. (It is worth mentioning, in the context of the construction of bridges between diplomatic history and political science discussed in this essay, that this esteemed diplomatic historian will soon become chair of the department of political science department of Boston University, a post he held in earlier years).

² <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/09/the-state-of-international-history/>; <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/pages/33862/h-diplo-state-field-essays>

had begun to pursue my 'side' interest in diplomatic history that had been sparked by a course I took in graduate school given by Professor Arno Mayer of Princeton. I began to read widely in this new sub-discipline and developed a new undergraduate lecture course on the subject. While striving to establish my scholarly credentials in modern French intellectual history (publishing a couple of books and a number of articles in that field in the course of the 1970s), I continued to read widely in the scholarly literature of my recently adopted field. I eventually decided that the time had come to try my hand at something new.

Once I had resolved to pursue intensively this long-standing professional avocation, I selected a topic for my maiden effort at original research -- a study of Franco-American relations after the First World War --, obtained the necessary funding, and went off to Washington, Paris, and several other sites of archival repositories with a feeling of exhilaration at embarking on what for me was an exciting new intellectual endeavor. After a year of research in the primary sources (which eventually yielded a journal article and a book chapter), I accepted a publisher's invitation to write a general history of twentieth-century international relations based on my extensive reading of the scholarly literature in that field.

My intention in recording the minutiae of this professional odyssey has been not only to convey the sense of genuine intellectual excitement that such a shift in scholarly orientation entailed. An additional purpose is to set the stage for what was to become a rude awakening as I plunged headlong into my new scholarly endeavor with the unabashed enthusiasm of a novice. Simply put, what I encountered was a sub-discipline under siege from a number of quarters within and beyond the historical profession as well as a hardy group of practitioners struggling to affirm the validity of their craft amid this increasingly inhospitable intellectual environment.

At the risk of taxing the patience of the reader already weary of references to the first-person singular in this essay, I cannot resist broaching the topic of the challenges that confronted the subfield of diplomatic history in the 1970s and 1980s with three anecdotes from personal experience as I revealed to colleagues my plans for a career change. The first anecdote is a brief one: "You're what!?" exclaimed a social historian acquaintance at a professional conference of French historians, with a glare of absolute incredulity I shall never forget. "History from the top down, huh?"

The second anecdote concerns an amiable colleague in the political science department of Boston University who was doing excellent work on the theory of international relations. In the course of a lunch conversation it became apparent that he and I shared an interest in the role of Germany in the international system. Toward the end of a lengthy description of his current attempts to develop heuristic models of interstate conflict in Europe 'over time' (as they say in his profession), I interjected a reference to one of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's foreign-policy initiatives as a prime historical example of one of the generalizations my interlocutor was striving to validate. 'Bismarck?' he replied. "I don't give a damn what Bismarck said, thought, or did."

The third and final incident from personal experience occurred during my participation in something called the 'Scholar-Diplomat Program,' which annually invited a dozen academic specialists in international relations to Washington for a week-long sojourn at the State Department. The dual purpose of the undertaking was supposedly to give the invited scholars practical experience in observing at first hand the operation of the government's foreign-policymaking apparatus while affording the host diplomats access to academic specialists whose research bore on their own particular area of responsibility. The fact that I was the sole historian in a group otherwise composed of political scientists should have alerted me to the disappointment I was soon to experience: None of the unfailingly courteous officials in the various branches of the State Department bureaucracy—including the genial officer at the French desk whose daily activities I was allowed to observe--evinced the slightest interest in the historical background of the contemporary problems with which they were required to grapple on a daily basis. For them, the record of what had happened earlier seemed to be not only 'past' but 'passed,' filed away for deposit in the archives, where it would sit unnoticed for decades before being declassified, resurrected by the Historical Office of the Department, and published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series primarily for the edification of the diplomatic historian rather than the policymaker.

On the basis of these three encounters I began to get the hint: the craft of diplomatic history had become the object either of derision or disinterest beyond the restricted circle of its practitioners. As I waded into the historiographical literature of the sub-discipline, I soon discovered there abundant confirmation of the impressionistic evidence gathered from personal experience as illustrated in the aforementioned anecdotes. In 1970 Alexander DeConde had sounded the alarm in the newsletter of the recently established organization of American diplomatic historians, the *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* (SHAFR).³ Ernest May, already on his way to becoming one of the leading historians of American foreign relations, chimed in the next year with a much longer lament.⁴ In 1980, a volume assessing the current state of historical scholarship in the United States included contributions from eminent historians celebrating the path-breaking work in a wide range of sub-fields during the past decade. In the chapter devoted to diplomatic history, May's Harvard colleague Charles Maier announced that diplomatic history had achieved so little in the way of important scholarship in the 1970s that it had become a "stepchild" of the historical profession. Diplomatic history was "marking time," while the other subfields of the historical profession were advancing in leaps and bounds with innovative and creative work.⁵

³ Alexander De Conde, "What's Wrong with American Diplomatic History?," *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (May 1970). 1-16.

⁴ Ernest R. May, "The Decline of Diplomatic History," in George Athan Billias and Gerald R. Grab, eds., *American History: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York, 1971), 399-430.

⁵ Charles Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in Michael Kammen, *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, 1980), 355-382.

How to account for the cacophony of complaints about the genre of history that once enjoyed an honorable place in the profession? Clues to this question had already appeared in my three encounters described above. First, there was the objection from social historians to the very subject matter that diplomatic historians customarily address in their work. Second, there was the widespread dissatisfaction with the methodology—or should I say lack of it?—of diplomatic history expressed by political scientists concerned with the theory of international relations. Third, there was the lack of interest on the part of practitioners of diplomacy, who seemed to dismiss the lessons of diplomatic history as irrelevant to the pressing concerns of the policymaker in the ‘real’ world of the present.

1. The State as Autonomous Actor in the Conduct of Foreign Relations: The Critique from the “New Social History”

For many years diplomatic history obviously took as its primary point of reference the traditional concept of the nation-state (as opposed to the broader concept of ‘society’ employed by social historians). More specifically, it concentrated on the relations between a particular nation-state and its counterparts in the international arena. Because of this preoccupation with the state and its relations with others of its kind, diplomatic historians inevitably focused most of their attention on the select group of individuals within a particular society that constituted the foreign-policymaking elite of its government. The composition of this elite might vary widely according to the extent of democratization and popular participation in the affairs of the country. As A.J.P. Taylor remarked, in reference to the great powers in nineteenth-century Europe: “[M]ost citizens of the country concerned knew little of its foreign policy or cared even less.” Terms like “the French” or “the Germans” meant no more than “those particular Frenchmen or Germans who happened to shape policy at that particular moment ... Sometimes they were literally two or three men--an emperor, his foreign minister, and some less official adviser; sometimes the permanent staff of the foreign service; sometimes the leaders in a parliamentary assembly and the principal writers on foreign affairs; sometimes [he added, almost as an afterthought] public opinion in the wider sense.”⁶ But even that “public opinion in a wider sense” in a democratic society such as the United States, an early student of the subject asserted, has never exceeded fifteen percent of the population. And it is usually much smaller than that.⁷

In short, according to this traditionalist view, the subject of the diplomatic historian’s research is a very thin layer of social reality. It was usually a self-enclosed, self-perpetuating oligarchy that maintained its distance from the rest of society and preserved its privileged position through various markers of distinction: the right schools, the right clubs, the right social circles. As a consequence, the primary-source

⁶ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (London, 1957), xxi.

⁷ V.O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York, 1961), 173, 174.

data on which the diplomatic historian had to rely for an accurate reconstruction of a country's record in foreign affairs were the communications among the members of this exclusive coterie: official telegrams between foreign office and embassies abroad, private letters, diaries, and memoirs of policymakers, and the like. It was this dependence on the historical evidence left behind by professional diplomats, who were hermetically insulated within the sanctity of their bureaus from the larger society whose interests they were employed to protect, that gave rise to G. M. Young's oft-repeated indictment of diplomatic history as "little more than the record of what one clerk said to another clerk."⁸

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the elitist biases that underlay most of what had passed for diplomatic history were sharply challenged by the proponents of the 'new social history.' The watchword of this school was 'history from the bottom up,' by which was meant the study of social groups that collectively constitute the vast mass of humanity customarily ignored by traditional historians. It is beyond dispute that no branch of the historical discipline has been more inclined to practice 'history from the top down' than the traditional type of diplomatic history represented by the Taylor quotation above. This was not necessarily so because of any temperamental or ideological preferences of its practitioners for 'the classes' as against 'the masses.' Indeed, even those diplomatic historians who considered themselves political radicals were as dependent as their more conservative colleagues on the evidence available. And, as noted above, that evidence came largely from the wielders of power in the society.⁹ Whether they liked it or not, diplomatic historians of whatever political persuasion accepted as axiomatic that the governing elite, rather than the 'common people outside the political arena' so dear to the social historians, shaped and executed the foreign policies of states, usually in as much secrecy and with as little accountability to the public it served that it could get away with. What this meant in concrete terms was the widespread conception of the state as an autonomous entity in the conduct of its foreign relations.

Recognition of the state's autonomy in the matters of foreign policy is by no means confined to the study of hierarchical, authoritarian societies. The chief executives of parliamentary democracies in Western Europe, whose authority in domestic affairs has been severely circumscribed by the countervailing power of parliament, press, and public interest groups, have traditionally enjoyed wide latitude in the conduct of diplomacy. The Official Secrets Act of the United Kingdom confers on the prime minister virtual immunity from public scrutiny when affairs of state (usually meaning relations with foreign powers) are concerned. The British government's astonishing ability to keep the secret of 'Ultra' --a cipher machine capable of decoding German radio

⁸ G.M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (London. 1953), 103.

⁹ See, for example, William A. Williams, *Roots of the Modern American Empire* (New York, 1969) ; Carl Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (Pittsburgh, 1969); Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York, 1965).

messages that gave the Royal Air Force advance knowledge of the Luftwaffe's targeting schedule during the Blitz--for almost thirty years after the end of World War II must have provoked the envy of publicity-averse dictatorships everywhere.¹⁰ Under the Third French Republic in the last decade of the nineteenth century, governments were toppled with comical regularity by shifting parliamentary coalitions, usually for reasons of domestic politics. Yet amid this environment of acute ministerial instability, a succession of shaky political coalitions in Paris was able to negotiate a military alliance with the Russian Empire between 1891 and 1894. The precise contents of that agreement were known to no one beyond the half-dozen diplomats, statesmen, and military officials who had been party to the talks; it was never submitted for legislative ratification in spite of its fateful provisions obligating France to mobilize its armed forces against the signatories of the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) if any of them mobilized against France's new eastern ally.¹¹ The notorious 'secret treaties' of World War I stipulating the redistribution of the Ottoman spoils among the European allies, the 'percentages agreement' between Churchill and Stalin concerning the partition of the Balkans into Soviet and Anglo-American spheres of influence during World War II, successive plans by the United States government for top-secret 'covert operations' to topple regimes in disfavor¹²--all of these attest to the persistence of the presumption (in democratic and authoritarian regimes alike) that in matters of foreign policy, governments are seldom answerable to anyone but themselves.

Expressions of distrust of foreign-policymaking elites and their exercise of almost unlimited power have a long pedigree. In the United States they appeared in the 1920s and 1930s amid the popular revulsion against World War I and its consequences. Many critics on this side of the Atlantic blamed Europe's slide into that catastrophe on the clandestine plotting of statesmen and diplomats. After the Second World War, Senator Joseph McCarthy had a brief but spectacular career indicting the 'cookie-pushers' and 'Ivy-Leaguers' of the State Department for 'losing' China and Eastern Europe to Communism. The antagonism on the part of a large section of the American public toward the 'Best and the Brightest' in the Kennedy-Johnson foreign-policymaking elite who dragged the United States into the Indochina quagmire during the sixties merely revived in a different form and with a different cast of demons the anti-elitist, populist sentiments of earlier eras. The consequences of this periodic resurgence of anti-elitism have been deleterious for the discipline of diplomatic history. By studying the state and the handful of individuals who controlled and managed its foreign-policy apparatus, scholarly specialists in the history of international relations have been put in the uncomfortable position of tacitly acquiescing in that oligarchic conception of the

¹⁰ When the British government ban was lifted in 1974, one of the participants in the decoding operation revealed its existence. F.W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (London, 1974).

¹¹ George F. Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York, 1984).

¹² Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York, 2007).

foreign-policymaking process—even if they express trenchant criticism of many of the policies themselves.

Partly in response to this anti-elitist critique, a new school of diplomatic historians extended the scope of its definition of the foreign-policymaking public beyond the narrow confines of the state to include identifiable *nongovernmental* elites and interest groups that operate outside the political process. In so doing, these scholars implicitly discarded the traditional conception of the state as an autonomous actor in history--long the underlying assumption of most traditional diplomatic history--in favor of a redefinition of the state as a political entity that is organically and inextricably linked to the larger society over which it exercises authority. The school that proposed this more inclusive approach to diplomatic history-- one is tempted to call it the 'social history of diplomacy'--derived much of its original inspiration from the long-neglected writings of the Weimar German historian Eckart Kehr, which were resurrected by Hans-Ulrich Wehler in the 1960s and thereafter exercised an important influence on several diplomatic historians in the United States.¹³

According to Kehr, the domestic political system (*Innenpolitik*), far from being irrelevant to the refined world of diplomacy (*Aussenpolitik*), as traditional diplomatic historians had believed, has had an important influence on the formulation and execution of foreign policy. The diplomatic historian was put on notice that she must devote a great deal of attention to the social, economic, political, and cultural processes within a particular society in order to grasp the dynamics of that society's relations with the outside world.¹⁴ An early application of the Kehrian doctrine of the *Primat der Innenpolitik* was Arno Mayer's two-volume study of the latter stage of the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Instead of rehashing the old debates based on the official records of the major states involved, Mayer concentrated on the activities of radical political movements, labor organizations, and other groups outside the political arena. It is scarcely surprising, in light of the type of data on which he relied, that Mayer's conclusions contradicted the conventional wisdom on the subject: In Mayer's analysis, considerations of national interest and balance of power, traditionally thought to preoccupy foreign-policy makers in times of crisis, recede far into the background. Instead, he insisted that *internal* social, economic, and political developments within the major belligerent states—notably conflicts that raised the prospect of a Europe-wide insurrection mounted by working-class movements inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—decisively influenced the policies of the

¹³ On The Bielefeld School founded by Wehler, see Roger Fletcher, "Recent Developments in West German Historiography: the Bielefeld School and its Critics." *German Studies Review* 1984 7(3): 451-480.

¹⁴ See Eckart Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preussisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte Im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans U. Wehler, [Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission zu Berlin, 19] (Berlin, 2012).

warmakers of 1917-1918 and the peacemakers of 1919.¹⁵ N. Gordon Levin's revisionist study of Wilsonian foreign policy reached a similar conclusion, emphasizing the domestic pressures on an American leader intent on shoring up the deteriorating liberal capitalist order in the world amid the twin menaces of Bolshevism and Imperialism.¹⁶

Whereas Mayer and Levin underscored the domestic *political* determinants of foreign policy, the opening of the private papers of various businesspeople and bankers in later years resulted in a number of studies that emphasized the *economic* wellsprings of diplomacy. Stephen A. Schuker's exhaustive study of the origins of the Dawes Plan drew heavily on the private papers of the Morgan partners Thomas Lamont and Dwight Morrow, Montagu Norman (governor of the Bank of England), as well as the Krupp and Thyssen collections.¹⁷ Charles Maier's celebrated analysis of social and economic stabilization in Western Europe after World War I exploited private business archives such as those of the *Compagnie de Saint-Gobain-Pont-à-Mousson* in France.¹⁸ Thomas Karnes's monograph on the Standard Fruit Company's ventures in Latin America,¹⁹ Dan Morgan's historical treatment of the international grain cartel,²⁰ and Anthony Sampson's and Daniel Yergin's studies of the seven multinational petroleum companies all focus on the foreign-policy consequences of the activities of organizations in the private sector that operated entirely apart from their governments.²¹ Akira Iriye called attention to the important role played by international non-governmental organizations on the global stage and urged diplomatic historians to pay more attention to their activities.²² Tony Smith chronicled the influence of ethnic and religious groups within the United States on behalf of foreign states, as did John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt

¹⁵ Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918* (New Haven, 1959) and *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York, 1967).

¹⁶ N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York, 1968).

¹⁷ Stephen A. Schuker, *The End of French Predominance in Europe: The Financial Crisis of 1924 and the Origins of the Dawes Plan* (Chapel Hill, 1976).

¹⁸ Charles A. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton, 1975).

¹⁹ Thomas L. Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise: The Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America* (New York, 1978).

²⁰ Dan Morgan, *Merchants of Grain* (New York, 1980).

²¹ Anthony Sampson, *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Shaped* (New York, 1975); Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York, 2008).

²² Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002)

in their controversial study of the Israel lobby.²³ During his brief career, Charles De Benedetti enriched our understanding of the activities of American pressure groups promoting the cause of world peace and their impact of their government's foreign policies.²⁴

This increasing attention to the influence of non-governmental organizations on foreign policy represents a powerful affirmation of the close connection between foreign policy and domestic politics. These and other works in this genre treat the state not as an entity unto itself, with its own interests and means of pursuing them, but rather as a reflection of the interests of its various constituencies within the broader social order. It is worth recording the caveat that this new sensitivity to the domestic sources of foreign policy does not entirely dispose of the social historians' objection to the 'elitist' assumptions of diplomatic history. This 'new diplomatic history' did not emulate the 'new social history' by directing its attention to 'the common man or woman,' who, by no stretch of the imagination could be thought to exercise an important influence on foreign policy. It merely substituted non-governmental elites (bankers, businesspeople, trade union leaders, professional revolutionaries, spokespersons of ethnic or religious groups, officials in organizations dedicated to peace, environmentalism, and advocacy for special interest groups) for the traditional foreign-policy-making elites in government. This neo-corporatist conception of international relations, which emphasizes the constraints imposed on foreign offices by organized interest groups or influential individuals in the private sector cannot be very comforting to the devotees of a genuinely egalitarian approach to diplomatic history. It is certainly a far cry from 'history from the bottom up' as exemplified by the influential work of my late colleague Howard Zinn.²⁵

Another indication of the movement away from the state-centered type of diplomatic history that prevailed for so long has been the increasing attention devoted by diplomatic historians to the role of culture in the interaction among nations. In the late 1970s Lawrence Kaplan, Morell Heald, and Akira Iriye were already pressing diplomatic historians to take note of the cultural setting of United States foreign policy and to pay close attention to the interaction of 'cultural systems' in the world.²⁶ It is important to note that this new interest in the cultural basis of international relations has tended to

²³ Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); John J. Mearsheimer and Steven M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2008).

²⁴ Charles DeBenedetti, *Origins of the Modern American Peace Movement, 1915-1929* (Millwood, NY, 1978); *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington, 1984).

²⁵ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, 2005).

²⁶ Morell Heald and Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Culture and Diplomacy* (Westport, 1977); Akira Iriye, "Culture and Power: International Relations as Intercultural Relations," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (April 1979), 115-128.

focus more on 'popular' rather than 'high' culture. Such a predilection made this type of diplomatic history much more acceptable to cultural historians who, like their social historian peers, strive to address their subject from below rather than from on high. The flagship journal of the profession has published a number of articles with popular culture as their centerpiece. Michael Hunt has hailed the proliferation of studies based on this new cultural approach to the history of the relations among states as a welcome sign that "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History" is finally "Coming to Closure."²⁷

Although they may not satisfy the stringent criteria of the most demanding social and cultural historians, the trends in diplomatic history sketched above demonstrate how far the sub-discipline has traveled in the last several decades. The time is long overdue, therefore, for scholars outside the sub-discipline—particularly those laboring in the vineyards of social and cultural history--to discard their outmoded notions of what diplomatic historians have been up to. They ought to recognize that most practitioners of the craft are no longer content to record "what one clerk said to another clerk," but rather have been probing the wider world of society and culture to explain the ways in which states conduct their relations with other states in the world arena.

2. The Absence of Methodological Rigor?: The Critique from the Theorists of International Relations

For many years diplomatic historians and international relations theorists formed a single field of scholarly inquiry. The classic texts of international-relations theory were written by political scientists who were fully conversant in the language of diplomatic history. Hans Morgenthau,²⁸ Raymond Aron,²⁹ Henry Kissinger,³⁰ and others freely acknowledged their extensive reliance on historical data in the formulation of their theories of international politics. International-relations theorists such as Robert Art, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Stanley Hoffmann, Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Jack Snyder, among others, have been unapologetic in their insistence that theory can and should be informed by historical knowledge. But during the 1960s and 1970s a significant group of theorists effectively turned its back on the lessons of diplomatic history to form a sub-discipline of political science that seemed to repudiate all connections with the field of historical scholarship. For many years thereafter, these two sub-disciplines, which had previously shared a common interest in probing the operation of the international order and mutually profited from intellectual interchange, went their own separate ways with little regard for the work being done in

²⁷ Michael Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No.1 (Winter 1992), 115-140.

²⁸ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, 1973).

²⁹ Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (New York, 1968).

³⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1969).

the other field. It is no exaggeration to say that most diplomatic historians and international relations theorists had little to say to one another.

The principal source of this professional parting of ways was a sharp disagreement over methodology. The political scientists accused the diplomatic historians of producing essentially worthless studies of isolated international events that could be ignored by the theorist intent on establishing scientifically verifiable generalizations about the relations among states. The accusation is a familiar one to all historians and is by no means applicable solely to the sub-discipline of diplomatic history: The historical approach treats each past event as unique, unrepeatable, and therefore incomparable to any other event before or since. The business of the traditional historian—diplomatic or otherwise—is narration and description rather than analysis. Her goal is to produce, on the basis of exhaustive research in the surviving records of the past, an accurate and comprehensive rendition of what actually transpired in a particular time and place.

By contrast, the theoretician of international relations displays an interest in specific historical developments only insofar as they can be related to comparable developments in different times and places in order to yield eternally and universally valid generalizations about the interaction of states in the international system.³¹ Although the late neo-realist theorist Kenneth Waltz paid attention to historical developments, he constructed general theories of interstate relations that did not engage the findings of diplomatic historians.³² To return to the earlier anecdote about my encounter with an advocate of this position: What Bismarck said, thought, or did is of no interest whatsoever to the theorist of international relations, whatever entertainment value it may hold for the antiquarian or the devotee of history-as-literature.

It is important to recognize that the crucial distinction between these two approaches is not, as is often alleged, that the former is descriptive and the latter analytical. The diplomatic historian worth her salt is no mere chronicler of past events. Her obligation is not only to recount what actually happened but also to explain why it happened in the way that it did. Such an explanation requires the identification of the causal connections between the events that she describes. This attention to causality belies the theorist's attempt to portray the traditional historian as a mere storyteller.³³ Instead,

³¹ An early articulation of this view may be found in E. Raymond Platig, *International Relations Research: Problem of Evaluation and Advancement* (Santa Barbara, 1967), 95-103.

³² Kenneth Waltz, *The Theory of International Politics* (New York, 1979).

³³ Theorists of postmodernism, of course, enthusiastically defend the historian's status as a teller of tales. The most lucid explication of the postmodernist approach to diplomatic history may be found in the writings of Frank Ninkovich. See, for example, his "Interests and Discourse in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 13, No. 2 (Spring 1989), 135-161; and his "No Post-Mortems for Post-Modernism, Please," *Diplomatic History* 22 (Summer 1998), 451-466. For a gentle critique of the postmodernist enterprise, see the review

the difference is to be found in the *type* of analysis that the diplomatic historian undertakes. He is content to offer an analytical explanation of a specific historical development (say, the formation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902) by identifying the chain of causality linking that event to preceding ones: the conclusion of a military alliance between France and Russia in 1894; Russia's subsequent rivalry with Japan in Korea and Manchuria; Japan's desire for Great Britain's assistance in keeping France neutral in case the competition with Russia in the Far East were to result in war between the two; Germany's decision to construct a navy; Great Britain's consequent desire to transfer much of its naval power from the Western Pacific to the North Sea in order to counter the impending German buildup there; Great Britain's decision to rely on Japan to balance Russian naval power in the Western Pacific after the aforementioned reduction of its own naval power in the region; etc.

The theorist of international relations could not care less about the exposition of the causal relationship among the discrete historical events sketched above, for its sole contribution to knowledge is the explanation of why these two unlikely candidates for an alliance proceeded to form one. Its scope is restricted to the specific historical period and geographical space in which the events under discussion unfolded. It contributes nothing to a general theory of alliance formation, deterrence, the operation of the balance of power, naval competition, or any other category of universal applicability. In short, the diplomatic historian is concerned with explaining important developments in the past as a self-enclosed chain of cause and effect. The theorist of international relations insists on treating such supposedly unique cases as members of a class of phenomena that recur regularly throughout history and therefore can be analyzed systematically in an effort to discover correlations among all members of the class. The ultimate objective goes far beyond the modest goal of the diplomatic historian, which is to describe and explain what has happened in a particular time and place. It is to elaborate a general theory of international behavior that will yield predictions of how nations can be expected to act in the future.³⁴

The specific methods employed by the theorist to attain the twin goals of generalization and prediction vary according to the particular school to which he subscribes. A mere recitation of the labels conventionally applied to some of the schools and sub-schools of international-relations theory-- behaviorism, systems analysis, game theory, cybernetic theory of decision-making, content analysis, transnationalism, functionalism, bureaucratic politics theory, operational codes theory, realism, constructivism, liberalism, world systems theory, among others--indicates the extraordinary variety of methodological approaches available. But however they may differ among themselves, what they all share in common is a marked disinterest in the type of research conducted by traditional diplomatic historians. Each of these theoretical approaches, whether

essay by William R. Keylor, "Post-Mortems for the American Century," *Diplomatic History* 25, No. 2 (Spring 2001), 317-327.

acknowledged or not, is modeled on the procedures and methodology of the natural sciences. Topics for investigation are chosen not on the basis of intrinsic interest but rather according to the specific requirements of a carefully prepared research design. The mode of inquiry is frequently collaborative in nature, with a research 'team' assembled at some institution of higher learning or think tank. The means of verification are typically statistical, marked by attempts to determine the standard deviation from 'mean' activity (to the social scientist, that term signifies a quantity having a value intermediate between the values of other quantities, rather than something that is 'nasty').

The esoteric language employed to describe the results of such macroscopic studies is likely to exasperate the diplomatic historian. A cursory perusal of the premier journals of international relations theory—*The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *The Journal of Peace Research*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Organization*, and *World Politics*--reveals that such ahistorical research has come to dominate the field. *The American Political Science Review* often publishes articles on international affairs, but not ones that would be of interest or use to diplomatic historians. A comparison of such studies with those appearing in journals such as *Diplomatic History*, *The International History Review*, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, *Relations internationales*, *La Revue d'histoire diplomatique* and the occasional article on diplomatic history—very occasional--in the *American Historical Review*, confirms that the two groups inhabit entirely different intellectual universes.

Is the yawning chasm between international-relations theory and diplomatic history bridgeable? For many years the theorists apparently thought it was, so long as the historians stuck to the drudgery of gathering quantifiable evidence of international behavior that could be fed into the data bases for use in subsequent large-scale studies. Much time and effort is saved if the project director can readily determine from some historical monograph precisely how many Zulus perished in the war of 1879 or how many square kilometers of territory were ceded by Germany in 1919. But the historian who resisted accepting such a subservient role in the pursuit of knowledge was hard put to define areas of common interest with his brethren in political science. The few genuine attempts by theorists to bridge the gap -- such as Alexander George's "Structured, Focused Comparison" approach failed to stimulate much interest among diplomatic historians.³⁵ Another valiant effort by diplomatic historians and international relations theorists to find common ground at the turn of the twenty-first century does not seem to have had much resonance in either field.³⁶ As a lot, diplomatic

³⁵ Alexander George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Paul Gordon Lauren, *Diplomacy: History, Theory, and Policy* (New York, 1979), 43-68.

³⁶ Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). The theorist Jack S. Levy remarked that while graduate students studying international relations in political science departments were required to take courses on research design and statistics, history departments rarely offered such courses to their students. He also observed that political scientists were "troubled by the failure of historians to be explicit

historians seemed more resistant than most members of the historical profession to the intrusion of quantification, model-building, and all the other accoutrements of the behavioral sciences. Two notable exceptions to the rule are the journals *International Security* and *Ethics and International Affairs*, which publish articles of theorists and historians, proving that détente is possible in the longstanding Cold War between the two approaches.

3. The Relevance of the Past for the Present?: Benign Neglect from the Policymakers

As we have seen, the theorist of international relations is inclined to devote at least cursory attention to the fruits of historical scholarship, if only because they furnish the raw data upon which analytical generalizations about the behavior of states in the international system may be constructed. The social scientist may condescendingly regard the diplomatic historian as a sort of fieldworker who laboriously collects 'the facts' to be programmed into the computer by the research team in quest of longitudinal patterns of aggregate behavior. But to the policymaker and the policy-oriented social scientist who is sometimes called upon to advise him, it seems that the discipline of diplomatic history has almost entirely been neglected as a potential source of usable information for the conduct of foreign policy.

Such was not always the case. When the representatives of the victorious powers assembled in Paris in 1919 to draft the peace treaties terminating the First World War, the counsel of historians was eagerly solicited by the various delegations. President Woodrow Wilson brought with him across the Atlantic a number of scholars who tendered advice on matters pertaining to the territorial claims based on historical boundaries of the Habsburg successor states.³⁷ The British historians R.W. Seton Watson and Charles K. Webster attended the conference and provided advice on a number of issues.³⁸ The French delegation relied on the advice of its country's most eminent historians, one of whom, Ernest Lavisse, had headed the *Comité d'études*, the French counterpart to Woodrow Wilson's wartime committee of scholarly advisers

about their theoretical assumptions and propositions." Jack S. Levy, "Explaining Events and Developing Theories: History, Political Science, and the Analysis of International Relations," in *Ibid.* 80-81.

³⁷ The Harvard historian Charles Homer Haskins was the major adviser to Wilson (his former colleague at Johns Hopkins) on territorial issues. William R. Keylor, "Versailles and International Diplomacy," in Manfred F. Boemeke, et al., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*. (Cambridge, U.K.: 1998), 492.

³⁸ See Erik Goldstein, *Winning the Peace: British Diplomatic Strategy, Peace Planning, and the Paris Peace Conference, 1916-1920* (Oxford, 1991). Webster was commissioned to prepare a handbook summarizing the diplomatic procedures of the Congress of Vienna. Seton Watson also gave advice to the Czechoslovak government.

called 'The Inquiry.'³⁹ This respect for the expertise of historians was revived during the Second World War. 'Wild Bill' Donovan, the swashbuckling chief of the newly created Office of Strategic Services (OSS), looted American universities of scholars, including such specialists in diplomatic history as William Langer, Raymond Sontag, and Bernadotte Schmidt, for service as intelligence analysts, presumably in the expectation that their historical knowledge would serve them well in that capacity.⁴⁰

Alas! We no longer live in an age when the architects of foreign policy conceive of history (and the historian) as a useful guide for present practice. The presumption that the past record of diplomacy has little or no relation to the practical concerns of the foreign-policymaker seems to be widespread, particularly in American governmental circles. One senses not so much disinterest in the historical background of current events as a preoccupation with a multitude of fast-breaking crises that demand practical solutions now. In short, if the social historian denounced diplomatic history as elitist and the theorist of international relations dismissed it as methodologically unsophisticated, the practitioner of diplomacy (in those rare moments when he has the time to give it thought) rejects it as irrelevant or at least places it far down on the list of priorities for the engagement of his sustained attention.

This indifference to the scholarly literature of diplomatic history on the part of foreign-policy makers doubtless stems from other considerations besides the constraints of time. Surely another must be the pervasive conviction among government officials as well as the public at large that historical understanding, particularly when it involves the domain of world affairs, is not something that belongs exclusively to a professional community. When economic matters come before this or that agency of the government, the advice of academic economists is frequently solicited. When questions of science policy are up for discussion, the Cambridge-to-Washington shuttle is filled with MIT professors summoned to the capital to give their views. But whenever government officials feel the inclination to reflect on the historical context of particular international developments in the present (which, as noted above, they apparently seldom do), they are unlikely to tap the expertise of the appropriate specialist in diplomatic history. Instead, they are probably inclined to rely on whatever hazy memories they may retain from college history courses; or, as in the case of John Kennedy's thumbing through Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* during the hectic weeks of October 1962 for hints on how to prevent the Cuban Missile Crisis from degenerating into what followed the Habsburg assassination crisis of 1914, they may be expected to consult whatever historical work happens to appear on the New York

³⁹ *Comité d'études. Travaux* (Paris, 1918).

⁴⁰ Robin W. Winks, *From Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (New York, 1987), 495-97.

Times best-seller list at the time.⁴¹ And such works are seldom produced by professional diplomatic historians.

Herein lies the irony: the disinterest of public officials in the body of scholarship built up by professional diplomatic historians is accompanied by an almost obsessive propensity for employing ill-conceived historical arguments to address contemporary problems or justify current policy. As Ernest May remarked, foreign-policy makers “are often influenced by beliefs about what history teaches and portends.” Unfortunately, as he demonstrated with considerable persuasiveness, the policymaker’s knowledge of what happened in the past is more often than not wildly inaccurate and a distorted version of historical reality. As a consequence, the policymaker is prone to drawing the wrong “lessons of the past” and likely to make choices for the future that are often unwise.⁴² The examples of such egregious misreading or misuse of history that May cites may be supplemented by others. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s constantly reiterated contention during the Vietnam War that any negotiation with the Hanoi regime would constitute a revival of the ‘spirit of Munich’ is perhaps the most memorable case in point. (The Munich analogy has resurfaced recently in the writings of those who oppose the negotiations with Iran over that country’s nuclear program). During the Cold War, references to the ‘Yalta sellout’ reverberated in the rhetoric of Republican politicians and conservative media without any noticeable attempt to consult diplomatic historians who had delved into the records of the Crimea conference to determine what had actually transpired there. The current crises in Iraq and Syria have produced innumerable references to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 by public officials and pundits who seem to have only the haziest understanding of the complex set of issues surrounding that wartime understanding that diplomatic historians have addressed.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to believe that policymakers can be induced to resist the temptation of amateurish historical analysis and to pay closer attention to the findings of professional historians who devote entire careers to the interpretation of past events. The tradition of ‘everyman his own historian’ is deeply rooted in a society that would be horrified at the thought of ‘everyman his own brain surgeon.’ The remedy for this propensity for faulty historical understanding that May suggests is one that should please the diplomatic historian who is insecure about the ‘relevance’ of his work to the problems of the here and now: Let governments consult eminent historians on a regular basis when a historical analogy or precedent for a current policy issue presents itself, just as they are accustomed to consulting molecular biologists or specialists in air

⁴¹ Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: 1962).

⁴² Ernest R. May, *“Lessons of the Past”: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York and Oxford, 1975), ix.

pollution when matters within their competence are raised as questions of public policy.⁴³

Conclusion: The Promising Prospects of the “New International History”

In the course of this essay, which has recounted the widespread dissatisfaction with diplomatic history on the part of social historians, theorists of international relations, and practitioners of diplomacy in earlier decades, I have tried to indicate how the field has undergone a fundamental transformation that has removed much of the justification for such criticism. By displaying a concern for the broader context of international relations, diplomatic historians in the past two decades or so have begun to repair the broken bridge to the world of the social historian by examining the role of organizations and groups that had previously been ignored. By remaining open to the potential application of international-relations theory to diplomatic history, diplomatic historians have opened long-clogged channels of communication to a small group of scholars of international relations in political science departments.⁴⁴ The one disappointment has been in the failure to persuade policymakers of the relevance of diplomatic history scholarship to provide appropriate ‘lessons’ for the conduct of diplomacy in the modern world.

To take account of these notable advances in professional diplomatic history, I would reissue a modest proposal that I have unsuccessfully pitched to colleagues in the profession for many years. It involves a simple semantic change that would accurately reflect the methodological and substantive strides that the discipline of diplomatic history has taken in recent decades. As we have seen, practitioners of the craft can no longer be justly accused of confining their scholarly attention to the messages between diplomats. They are increasingly attentive to the entire context—economic, social, and cultural, as well as political and military—of the relations among nations in the world. Why not consider adopting ‘international history’ as a new label for the type of scholarly work and teaching that “diplomatic” historians have been doing. That term has existed in the United Kingdom as the title of a scholarly journal to which diplomatic historians regularly contribute. It is the title of the division of the history department in the London School of Economics and Political Science in which diplomatic historians reside.

Lest anyone think that this modest proposal for a name change is in any way original, I will conclude with a declaration by the late Ernest May that was issued at the very beginning of the period addressed in this essay: “Diplomatic history as such has entered

⁴³ May, *“Lessons” of the Past, 172-190*. See also Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York, 1988).

⁴⁴ A recent example of the efforts of diplomatic historians to explore the intellectual, cultural, and social context of international relations as well as to take account of international-relations theory is Peter Jackson’s superb *Beyond the Balance of Power: France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War* (Cambridge, UK, 2014).

a decline. It may be approaching demise. The field gradually taking its place—perhaps best termed...international history—is new. Its nature and contours are just beginning to become perceptible. It promises, however, to be one of the rich areas of future historical scholarship.”⁴⁵ Of course, even such a radical semantic change—which would require a renaming of the flagship journal and the flagship H-Net list of the profession--would not satisfy those who have come to believe that the term ‘international’ itself is inappropriate and anachronistic in a globalized, borderless world in which the nation-state is on the way out. But that is another story for another time.

William R. Keylor is Professor of history and international relations at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University. He is the author of *A World of Nations: The International Order since 1945* (2nd edition, 2009), *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History since 1900* (6th edition, 2011), “The United Nations’ Record as the Guardian of Global Cooperative Security” in Vojtech Mastny and Zhu Liqun, eds., *The Legacy of the Cold War: Perspectives on Security, Cooperation, and Conflict* (New York, 2014), pp. 81-122 and, most recently, “The Second Cold War in Europe: The Paradoxes of a Turbulent Time,” in Lorenz Lüthi, ed., *The Regional Cold Wars in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East* (2015), 141-174. He is a proud member of the Editorial Board of H-Diplo.

© 2015 The Author.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

⁴⁵ Ernest May “The Decline of Diplomatic History,” in Billias and Grob, *American History: Retrospect and Prospect*, 430.