

The New Diplomatic History
An Open Letter to the Membership of SHAFR
Passport December 2008

Ever since E.P. Thompson urged his fellow historians to wake up and rescue his subjects from the enormous condescension of posterity, the historical profession has seemed preoccupied with the reconceptualization of the past and its own mission. This has included keeping up with fads in the social sciences. For many historians, however, that has gone against the grain of their training and disposition: perhaps most are not natural conservatives, for though they are drawn to the ghosts of the past, they also do so with fresh minds in pursuit of Geyl's famous argument without end. An open mind to revisionism is not the same thing as fashion consciousness. Yet, the latter impulse has been strong, too, not only because theory is a hard thing to escape, but also because of the usual pressures for professional innovation.

As most of us are too aware, such pressures long ago forced (or encouraged) diplomatic historians to begin to promote their field as something grander called international history. International history, of course, includes many things besides diplomatic history, and many international historians know as much or more about the global footprints of non-governmental organizations and private groups as they do about rulers, statesmen and foreign ministries.

How we got to this point is well known. The search for a "new" approach to diplomatic history in the United States began in earnest soon after the wave of Cold War revisionists appeared in the 1960s. Earlier innovations, such as those by the now nearly forgotten historian Sidney Fay, focussed almost entirely upon events themselves. The Cold War revisionists forced students to rethink the central premises of American foreign policy. The famous books by Williams, LaFeber, Kolko and others were mainly teleological efforts to undercut the liberal orthodoxy, but they had an important side-effect, which came by way of importation of the Germans' *Primat der Innenpolitik*. Thenceforth many American historians would choose to write about diplomacy from the inside out, incorporating institutional, economic, financial and social history into their accounts of American relations with the rest of the world. Much of this work became almost indistinguishable from policy history.¹

It would only be a matter of time until others further broadened the focus to include non-traditional subjects in their own right. The domestic emphasis of diplomatic history meant, on the one hand, historians had to take seriously the existence of many groups besides "official actors." There had always been the press and hired publicists, but new emphasis was placed on other pressure groups—educators, churches, chambers of commerce and so on. Extending the "non-governmental" emphasis abroad with missionaries, merchants and even tourists was a logical extension.

The drive to include a multiplicity of characters and settings did not extend, however, to plot. The bevy of international historians working at various degrees removed from the study of the United States' interactions with the world now fall into two quite disconnected groups: those who study the global proliferation of various non-state actors, groups, movements and even non-human subjects such as commodities; and those who write about epiphenomena—democratization, modernization, etc.—and their manifestations on American and other societies. Working for the most part separately from

both groups are most political historians, who continue to produce empirical analyses of events with the usual heavy focus upon decision-making at the highest levels of government and with less concern for “the process of diplomacy than with the results.”²

That the various sub-groups of international historians do not work interstitially is not a problem in itself. We are aware and occasionally draw from one another’s work, and count ourselves a remarkably rich and varied group. Yet the parallel drives for specialization and diversification have resulted in a field of historical scholarship which now includes almost anything that crosses a border, hence the latest favorites: “transnational” and “global” history. We seem not too far off from what our nineteenth century predecessors called “universal” history; and soon we may find that our own field of study has come to include anything and everything under the sun.

Where does this leave the history of American diplomacy? Recently a few young historians have called for a back to basics movement: recognizing the appeal of the so-called “new political history” and “new military history” (both more or less variations on the old with added elements of social and cultural studies), they have begun to urge a return to the glorious and apparently dormant tradition of Ranke, Butterfield *et al.*³ There is nothing wrong with this, although there is little that is, or should be, particularly new about it apart from the inclusion of gender and behavioral science. It does not represent a way to bridge the methodological and epistemological gaps within international history.

To argue that a bridge is neither necessary nor desirable is certainly a defensible position. Too much innovation for innovation’s sake of course can be self-defeatingly insular. On the other hand, the moment is ripe now to build such a bridge. International history is more popular than ever among graduate students. The undergraduate demand for instruction in diplomatic and military history continues to rise in most universities. But most course offerings that go by the label “United States and the World” seem to combine haphazardly the various fads of international history with a residue of political narrative. The situation need not be so dire. Staring all of us in the face is an important trend that took off long ago across the social sciences but for some inexplicable reason has failed to catch on among international historians, especially those whose subject is the history of U.S. foreign relations. This is network analysis.

Most people with first-hand experience in world affairs know well that the work of diplomats hardly remains confined to what one clerk said to another, even before the post-World War II bureaucratic reforms of the State Department that rose the premium placed upon the interaction with non-governmental groups and individuals. Since the very invention of their profession, diplomats have been cultural and political interpreters and interlocutors, living, working and thinking between and among diverse states and societies. Their webs of encounters and relationships, including their extended families, have long been at the nexus, and not on the anecdotal margins, of their combined roles of historical observers and actors. Both traditional diplomatic history with its narrow focus on officialdom and its successors with their self-conscious negation of it have overlooked these critical networks of persuasion. The result has been an understanding of the past that is piecemeal and—ironically—more disjointed on paper than in life.

To study the transnational networks—both official and unofficial—of individuals and to consider their work as part of an extended effort at community building (or dismantling, as the case may be) over time would do away with the over-rigid distinction between state and non-state actors, and would reassert the importance of biography,

prosopography, social geography and psychology to the study of international history. We must return to exploring and analyzing the machinery of diplomacy, only now both more broadly and more deeply, realizing that decisions taken at the top of the bureaucracy are almost always conditioned by relationships two or three levels down, while trends and forces that mobilize those at the bottom and outside on the streets are almost always absorbed into policy at the very same levels. This vital, middle ground of action and perception is a promising “new” area for research that need not supplant other realms of international scholarship, but may enrich them with greater insight into the minds of those who toil on the frontlines of foreign affairs. Their stories need to be featured more prominently, as do historical analyses of their *modus operandi*. It is finally time for us to restore everyday diplomats to their proper, innovative place at the center of international history.

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¹ The failure to differentiate between the two is now so common as to go unnoticed. See, for example, Michael H. Hunt, “The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure,” in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *America in the World. The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 93-126.

² Waldo Heinrichs quoted in Smith Simpson, ed. *Instruction in Diplomacy: The Liberal Arts Approach*. Monograph 13, The American Academy of Political and Social Science, Philadelphia, 1972, p. 89.

³ Karl W. Schweitzer and Matt J. Schumann, “The Revitalization of Diplomatic History: Renewed Reflections” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008.