

Third Conference of the New Diplomatic History Network: 'Bridging Divides'

Opening Address: Giles Scott-Smith

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Friends,

It's great to see everyone here, with the prospect of more joining us through the day. Welcome to our beautiful Dutch provincial backwater, where the backdrop of the 13th century Abbey, with its modern glass and steel interior, is somehow ideal for the merger of old and new that we are going to explore over the next three days.

This is a major conference in several ways.

It's the third gathering of the NDH network, since it was called into being by a group of scholars in 2011 to reinvigorate the study of diplomatic history. I'm really pleased that most of the original group are here for NDH3, although sadly Ken Weisbrode was unable to make it, and Ariane Leendertz has moved on to different fields.

It's the largest of the three conferences so far, in Leiden in 2013 and Copenhagen in 2016. But size is not what matters here. More important is that the conference functions as a representation of the diversity of 'new diplomatic history'. All three conferences have reflected the current trends in research, attracting an ever-widening variety of approaches and perspectives on the study of diplomacy.

It's the moment where we roll out a new journal, *Diplomatica*, which we hope will become a central point for the kinds of discussions and investigations presented here and elsewhere. But more on that later.

An important dimension to all of this is that there is currently no ambition to turn the new diplomatic history network into a formal legal entity, like an association or society. The power of the network is exactly its flexibility, and that

flexibility has allowed us to come a long way in the last five years, with a completely rebuilt and improved website, an active presence on Twitter (#NDH3), a journal, and a plan for organizing regular conferences. I'm really pleased to announce that Karen Gram-Skjoldager has agreed to host NDH4 at Aarhus University some time in 2020 or 2021. We'll see how long we can maintain this Dutch-Danish one-two on the conferences – there is no desire for monopoly here, only a desire for keeping a good thing going. Others are more than welcome to step in with offers. Considering that NDH has no income whatsoever, this is an amazing achievement in a short time, all thanks to the dedication of a select few, and here, alongside Ken and Karen, I'd also specifically like to thank my RIAS colleague Dario Fazzi for being our totally-in-control webmeister.

This is also an important moment for setting out what NDH is, and perhaps can be. The use of the term 'new' is of course awkward, one prone to quick obsolescence. Nevertheless, it serves a purpose to point to an expanded interpretation of diplomacy, and an engagement with the multiple perspectives now being applied, many of which are on show here at NDH3. New does not have to mean condemning the so-called 'old' either, it can simply mean expanding one's vision to embellish what already exists. I'd like to emphasise three elements here that I think can illustrate this.

Firstly, looking beyond 'the West' as the normative origin of diplomacy and diplomatic practice. Other regions have seen forms of diplomacy that need to be examined not as anomalies but as all-inclusive systems in their own right, such as those of imperial China and the tributary system in the Asia Pacific, and the practices of the Ottomans in the Mediterranean and Eurasia. De-centering the West as the norm also derails the notion of there being one single narrative of 'modernity' for diplomacy. Thus, Iver Neumann has laid out a position on the 'evolution' of diplomacy, but this ethnographic approach sees diplomatic change as a symptom of social change in general, not in terms of a gradual standardization of Western modernity. Naoko Shimazu's work on the cultural history of Japanese diplomacy, and the different forms of diplomacy as

'performance', is an ideal example of this wider approach. I am grateful that Naoko has joined us for this event to share her perspective on this de-centred approach.

Secondly, the determination to look beyond standard historical periodisations. This conference is termed 'Bridging Divides' in a disciplinary sense, but also in a temporal sense – one of the central purposes was to see if we could establish a dialogue between the early modernists and the modernists on the common terrain of diplomatic investigation. This impulse also lies behind *Diplomatica*, which also aims to link the study of diplomacy across time. John Watkins, our other keynote, has led the field in this respect with his seminal article 'Towards a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe' from 2008, and we invited John to exactly see to what extent the concepts he has been developing can be applied across time and space in diplomatic history as a whole. As John said in the introduction to that article, "The modern cross-disciplinary study of international relations has broadened the discussion of diplomatic issues for later historical periods, but the presentist biases of that conversation — centered on nineteenth-century understandings of the nation — have limited its application to the medieval and early modern periods." Likewise, modernist notions of diplomacy centred on the nation-state have a thing or two to learn from analyses of the more fluid diplomatic landscape that prevailed prior to the 19th century. The re-evaluation of international organisations, for instance. Thus the recent work on the League of Nations has focused not so much on its function as an international institution dominated by imperial powers that attempted to manage inter-state relations, but as a multi-layered network of identities, expertise, informal governance, and transnational networks that spanned the globe. Transnational history has opened up possibilities for reframing interactions in a way that no longer revolves around the nation-state. This also creates opportunities for crossing periodization divides. But early modern history has also pointed the way in terms of exploring the performance of diplomacy, and the role of emotion, both of which have subsequently been applied to the study of an apparently more staid and rational modern era.

Thirdly, there is the scope of diplomacy itself. How far do we go in terms of designating something as 'diplomacy' and determining someone as a 'diplomat'? In many ways, this is at the heart of the NDH enterprise. Non-state actors, be they individuals or organisations, have long been treated as adjuncts to the state-led international system, but treating them as diplomatic actors in their own right has been a step too far for many. Track II, or one of its variants, has been the acceptable compromise, interpreting the actions of non-state actors purely in terms of the services provided in the interests of state-led diplomacy as a whole. Yet major differences exist on this point across disciplines, with literary scholars and geographers being more attuned to the diplomatic qualities of non-state actors than modern historians or international relations theorists. However, even here the positions are changing. In her piece for the inaugural issue of *Diplomatica*, economic historian Laurence Badel refers to the 'diplomacity' of non-state actors that take on state-like roles. Terms such as informal, unofficial, and civilian diplomacy have been in widespread use since at least the 1970s. At the end of August I attended an excellent conference at the Centre for European Global Studies in Basel, which used the term 'a post-institutional approach', which referred to the institution of the state but also the institution of traditional state-based historiography on diplomacy. Likewise, the 'practice turn' in international relations has turned attention to what Adler and Pouliot refer to "the quotidian unfolding of international life", analyzing "the ongoing accomplishments that, put together, constitute the 'big picture' of world politics." In this way, diplomacy, long considered marginal by IR theory outside of the English School, has become a relevant topic for its investigations. For our opening editorial of *Diplomatica*, Ken Weisbrode and myself refer to interactions between polities. In this way, diplomacy relates to any activity, setting, or phenomenon that represents the interests, status, actions, or behaviour of a polity vis-à-vis another. Its agents may be individuals, groups, or official, quasi-official, and unofficial actors. It must act in some way to represent and affect the collective interrelationship of actors between and across such territories. In this context, the state may or may not be *primus inter pares* among polities, depending on historical period, regional location, and type of activity. So we

pitch it broad, but we pitch it clearly, with enough clarity to encompass a designated field, but enough slack to incorporate a range of opinion.

I am particularly interested in the increasing focus on the role of business, be that on individuals, corporate networks, or the interlinking of exchange and consular activities. There was enough good material in this field to organize a few panels on the theme at this conference. It again demonstrates the blurring of public and private, state and non-state identities in the passage of diplomatic practice, and provides another broad-ranging theme that bridges the periodization divide, being as much a modern as an early modern phenomenon. I see strong potential for linking the study of diplomacy with the history of global capitalism that has become a major theme in economic history in recent years, focusing on business representatives as political mediators, 'diplomatic entrepreneurs', and cultural brokers.

The many and varied papers at this conference reflect these three themes, and more. We have two excellent keynotes, two more excellent plenary roundtables, and 19 panels of papers. There is enough evidence to indicate that from whichever perspective you are coming from, the term 'new diplomatic history' does mean something. Lets try and keep this exciting exchange going in the years to come.