

# H-Diplo ESSAY 241

**Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars**

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*Entering the Profession at the End of the Cold War*

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I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1973, where we lived until 1981, before moving to Butler, a working class town about 30 miles north of the city. Western Pennsylvania's steel mills were in the midst of closing, as was Butler's Pullman-Standard Plant, devastating the local economy. The one uniting solace across race, class, and gender lines for the whole region was the success of Pittsburgh's professional football and baseball franchises. My father was an Episcopal priest and each Sunday in autumn, at the moment in the service when the congregation was invited to pray silently or aloud, someone would invariably send out a prayer for a Steelers' victory. I have, like most others who left the region, remained a lifelong Pittsburgh sports' fan.

I still harbor that pride and affection for Western Pennsylvania, but during my high school years, Butler felt increasingly small and provincial, and I longed to expand my horizons. I couldn't wait until I could head off to college. My high school guidance counselors were most experienced at helping students apply to the University of Pittsburgh, Penn State, and the myriad of other state schools in Pennsylvania. However, my parents were both originally from New England and were firm believers in the merits of a liberal arts education, leading me to look to the Northeast in my search. Yale was my top choice, and I was thrilled to be accepted.

At Yale, we were not required to choose a major until the end of our second year. Each major had some prerequisites, but it was easy to cover several of them. Thus I could have chosen political science, philosophy, or English, among others, but I chose history. The requirements for history majors were designed for us to experience a breadth of subjects rather than depth. The department was filled with distinguished scholars such as Howard Lamar, John Blum, Jonathan Spence, Jaroslav Pelikan, Michael Howard, Donald Kagan, Robin Winks, John Boswell, Gaddis Smith, C. Vann Woodward, David Montgomery, and Nancy Cott. (Note the gender ratio.) I suspect that I was not alone in taking courses taught by as many as these renowned historians as I could fit into my schedule, and they rarely disappointed. Yet, when it came time to choose a topic for my senior thesis, I was at a bit of a loss and quite uncertain that I understood this whole business of historiography. At that point, I was taking a class on the History of Modern Ireland with Jane Ohlmeyer. I found her friendly and approachable, so I asked her to supervise me. Ohlmeyer is an early-Modernist so she guided me toward a thesis on the colonial settlements of seventeenth-century Northern Ireland. The depths of Sterling Memorial Library happened to have relevant census documents that gave me the much-needed primary sources required for my endeavor.

Upon graduation, I was restless and directionless, but also keen for some new experiences. So I went off to travel for a time, before spending two years teaching English in Japan. This was the first time I had been part of an international community and was intrigued at the way we all perceived history differently. Though I was still undecided on a career path, I decided

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<sup>1</sup> The views presented here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States Government.

that I would like to go back to school, and wanted to be abroad. I chose the London School of Economics and Political Science for a Master's Degree in the History of International Relations. LSE had just hired a number of younger historians who were working on the Cold War period. In particular, I took a class taught by Odd Arne Westad on the Cold War and Third World Revolutions, which included many of the ideas he would turn into his groundbreaking book, *The Global Cold War*.<sup>2</sup> I was captivated by the class and the subject matter. Westad was especially good at explaining historiographical debates, and I realized how U.S.-centered my previous education had been.

As the 1990s saw the opening of many formerly closed archives, facilitating the internationalization of diplomatic history, the possibilities for groundbreaking work were very exciting. With that class as a starting point, I chose to write about the Ethiopian Revolution and the Ogaden War as a Cold War conflict for my Master's thesis and then my Ph.D. dissertation. My choice stemmed, in part, from the fact that there was little to no scholarly work on the Jimmy Carter administration that had been written with access to the archives, since we were just hitting the 25 year mark for declassification in the United States. Indeed, in the summer of 2003, I contacted the archivists at the Carter Library to see if I could conduct some research in July before heading to London to commence the doctorate, and the archivists said to come in August because they were releasing a whole tranche of documents on the Horn, so I showed up the day after they were released.

Those were exciting days to be at LSE. London, itself, was thriving in the early aughts prior to the economic crash. We had a tightly knit cohort of Ph.D. students who socialized together and really supported each other's work. I even married one of them. Westad, Nigel Ashton, Piers Ludlow, Kristina Spohr, and Steve Casey were supervising many of us and we were all participating in the Cold War Studies Centre (CWSC) founded by Westad and Michael Cox, LSE Professor of International Relations. The CWSC eventually developed into IDEAS, a major foreign policy think tank. My now husband, Garret Martin, and I worked at the Centre and acted as managing editors of the journal *Cold War History*. Working on the journal was particularly rewarding, as we were exposed to so many of the new scholarship trends in real time; I read articles by new names who are now well-established scholars.

The Centre also joined a previously established partnership with George Washington University's Cold War Group and the University of California at Santa Barbara's Center for Cold War Studies, playing host every third year to a graduate student conference. I met future colleagues and made life-long friends at these conferences. One of the more eye-opening panels at the GWU-UCSB-LSE conferences took place in Santa Barbara in 2005. A number of mid-career historians, who had obviously landed desirable academic positions, were discussing the job market, while others in the audience objected to their rosy outlook. There were many raised voices and I, and the other graduate students, left with the feeling that we were never going to get a job after we finished.

Of course, all was not perfect within the International History Department. There were obvious tensions between some of the longer serving faculty and the new hires, but I felt a real sense of collaboration and enjoyed the free exchange of ideas among my peers and with our supervisors.

For my dissertation, I had envisioned writing an international history with visits to multiple international archives. Some Soviet documents on the subject had been declassified as part of the Carter-Brezhnev Project of the mid 1990s, and the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C. had copies of those.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, The Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project had translated documents on the Horn from East Germany, Yugoslavia, and others.<sup>4</sup> All of which I found very useful. However, Vladimir Putin had come to power in Russia, and those archives closed back up, so

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<sup>2</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/42/horn-of-africa-crisis>

getting at Politburo deliberations or documents of the International Department was not going to happen. At the same time, scholars were returning from places like Algeria, Tanzania, and South Africa with access to their foreign office documents, so I hoped to do the same in Ethiopia. Since President Meles Zenawi had helped to overthrow the regime of Mengistu Haile Miriam, I thought it possible that the Ethiopian Government would be open to releasing the latter's foreign office documents relating to the United States.

I contacted the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University to see if I could set up a collaborative relationship. For a fee, the Institute provided me with a letter of introduction in Amharic and English to the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, explaining my research request. Aided by a Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) fellowship, I spent the autumn of 2006 in Addis Ababa, making regular visits to the Foreign Ministry with my requests to see some relevant documents. There was a research room on a lower level filled with boxes of documents and several people sitting at tables looking through papers. Unfortunately, I never received permission to move past the window.

I took some time to travel around the country, visiting the churches in Lalibela, hiking in the Simien Mountains, and visiting the remote towns of the Omo Valley. Of particular interest to Cold War historians was the border town of Omorate, whose main feature was an abandoned agricultural project set up as a collaboration between Mengistu's regime and North Korea, leaving it one of the most depressing places I have visited. Each time I returned from one of these trips, I was informed that my request was still pending. It was still pending when I left after 3 months. I certainly hope that someone with better Amharic and/or a better cultural understanding of the Ethiopian Government will access them soon.

I completed the dissertation and eventually turned it into a book published by Kent State University Press as a title in the New Studies in U.S. Foreign Relations series edited by Mary Ann Heiss.<sup>5</sup> As I neared completion of the dissertation, I embarked on the daunting job search. At that point, the International History Department at LSE did not have any sort of Ph.D. placement program. We were largely on our own, and the faculty, while not unsympathetic, seemed surprised that we would even need such a thing. Most of them had completed their doctorates at Oxford, Cambridge, and the LSE and had entered a job market when one might need to do a one year fellowship, but then a good position would make itself available. The new reality, however, was that a glut of newly minted Ph.D.s, combined with a dwindling number of diplomatic history posts in the Anglophone world, meant that fewer and fewer of us would take the traditional path into academia.

The second limiting factor in my job search was that my future husband, an Irish citizen, was searching at the same time and we wanted to land in the same place. As it happened, I got a job with the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian. Garret gamely went through the process of getting a working visa, a green card, and eventually U.S. citizenship. It helped that D.C. has multiple universities, think tanks, NGOs, government agencies, and other organizations that like to hire people with Ph.D.s. In particular, Garret was able to translate LSE's relationship with George Washington University into an adjunct job, before he was hired full-time at American University.

When I joined the State Department, I specifically became a historian of U.S. policy toward Africa. The office compiles the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes, a series that was launched in 1861 under President Abraham Lincoln. Initially, I worked as a historian in the Policy Studies division, contributing to policy-supportive studies, before I transferred into a *FRUS* compiling division. The first *FRUS* volume I compiled focused on the Carter administration's policy toward the Horn of Africa. As any historian can imagine, it was incredibly exciting to suddenly be able to access all of the documents that had remained classified when I was doing my original dissertation research! I certainly would have liked to

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<sup>5</sup> Louise Woodroffe, *Buried in the Sands of the Ogaden: the United States, the Horn of Africa, and the Demise of Détente* (Kent: Kent State University Press: 2013).

have used some of those documents while writing my book, including those that addressed the covert action that was ultimately acknowledged in the *FRUS* volume.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, I have compiled other volumes on Africa covering the Carter and Reagan administrations and am now working on the volume on Somalia from 1989-1994. As other historians of the Cold War seek to write international histories, we who work on *FRUS* remain by our access and mandate focused on U.S. Foreign Policy. We are universally proud of the role we play in declassification and our ability to make primary documents accessible on-line and in print to a world-wide audience. My colleagues and I work very hard to keep the series “thorough, accurate, and reliable.”<sup>7</sup> For good or for bad, the *FRUS* volumes I have edited will remain relevant far beyond my monograph.

As I contemplate the future of my own career, as well as the future of Diplomatic History as a discipline, the outlook is cloudy. The women of my generation were not ground-breakers like the generation who came before us, but the discipline still remains predominantly male, as well as predominantly white. Likewise, the balancing of two academic careers as part of a couple is not new, though it is increasingly the norm and it is a burden shared across gender lines, although probably not equally. While organizations like SHAFR and the American Historical Association (AHA), as well as research universities, are making efforts to diversify their boards, panels, and faculty, they still fall short in terms of including the underrepresented. Unless our institutions can liberalize their increasingly archaic tenure systems, talented historians will continue to seek less traditional but no less rewarding routes. At the same time, universities should be obligated to celebrate and encourage alternate career paths. As I write this, I and most of H-Diplo’s readership are locked down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Universities are rapidly attempting to create contingency plans for the autumn, making it likely that at least some aspects of teaching and university life may never again look the same. The current generation of historians is producing sophisticated scholarship and exploring new areas of inquiry, based on multi-archival and multi-lingual sources, and I hope that they are given the opportunity to continue to do so.

Additionally, the discipline of diplomatic history is still grounded in archival research. At the Office of the Historian, along with our colleagues at the National Archives and across the U.S. Government, we are grappling with a future of digital and born-digital records, the question of what constitutes a record in an era of emails and social media, and the coming explosion in terms of the sheer volume of records as the national security apparatus has expanded. How can we or any country devote enough resources to come even close to living up to a thirty year line for processing records for declassification? Also, does this seeming international trend toward authoritarianism threaten future access to formerly open archives? Can we again reach the hope of the early post-Cold War period that we would get used to an expanding universe of accessible documents with language proficiency and funding as the only obstacles? It looks bleak at the moment.

These problems are not insurmountable, though some are obviously more difficult to address than others. Diplomatic history has evolved over the years to become more international, more inter-disciplinary, and more inclusive, but it will take some creative minds to sustain this momentum.

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<sup>6</sup> *Foreign Relations, 1977-1980, Volume XVII, Horn of Africa, Part 1*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p1>.

<sup>7</sup> Public Law 102-138, Section 198, 28 October 1991.