

# H-Diplo ESSAY 250

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

26 June 2020

*The Road Taken: International Relations as History*

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E250>

Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

ESSAY BY JONATHAN HASLAM, INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

---

Not until reading this account did I realise that I spent my entire adult life as an intellectual tourist. School had introduced me to early modern British and European history—one of three disciplines I studied from the age of sixteen. It afforded a first taste of historical research with an unheralded but impressive public lecture on Phillip II of Spain by John Elliott, then a rising star in the late sixties. But, deserting textbook history in 1969, I read International Relations as part of the social sciences at the London School of Economics (LSE), in search of understanding the Vietnam War raging at the time. Those who taught us, however, timidly refused even a conversation about the war; political activism was anathema as the LSE suffered the petty violence of anarchistic discontent. The subject as presented to us was a milk-and-water version of behaviourist American Political Science. The only truly original British thinker was E.H. Carr and he was in Cambridge, no longer teaching. The focus of the degree was very limited and ultimately disappointing pursuit, I soon realised. The “English” school—a cultural reaction to U.S. intellectual hegemony—had yet to emerge and any normative theory was music of the future. It looked like a disastrous choice made in understandable ignorance.

A stimulating course, however, was the seminar on strategic studies taught in the final year to a select few by an original thinker who wrote little, Philip Windsor. This was a genuinely Socratic experience. Notes taken from reading were forbidden. Secondary works were actively discouraged. We were obliged to think on our feet and argue through the fundamentals of the subject, the core being Karl von Clausewitz's *On War*.<sup>1</sup> Only the original Everyman edition of Clausewitz edited by the German experts, Peter Paret and Michael Howard, was permitted. And the one text that otherwise made a serious impact was Robert Jervis's classic on perception and misperception in international relations.<sup>2</sup> Social Psychology was my favourite subject in Part I of my degree.

Starring in International History were the formidable Ragnhild Hatton, on the history of the Baltic Wars, and James Joll in black pinstripe and pink silk tie elegantly presenting Europe from 1789 as he paced in front of the blackboard flicking chalk up and down, speaking entirely off the cuff. I had no idea, of course, that he was friend to Soviet spy Anthony Blunt, whom he and his partner sheltered after Blunt was outed by the establishment. A kindly, unflamboyant benefactor was eminent historian of Japan Ian Nish, who meticulously demonstrated what a difference could be made to serious research by a deep knowledge of foreign languages; in this instance the Manchurian crisis of 1931.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. P. Paret and M. Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Non-specialist Economics was required and for this I am forever grateful. But the class teaching left a lot to be desired. And the lectures were noisily disrupted by self-styled Marxists. Survival necessitated scavenging in second-hand bookshops nearby for a lucid text. Finally the brilliantly lucid Tibor Scitovsky did the job, though not exactly a text for non-specialists.<sup>3</sup>

Later as a research student I realised that the foundation in the social sciences that I had acquired actually provided the necessary framework for studying the history of international relations in the round, as diplomatic history can offer little but mere description without such skills. None of my counterparts at Cambridge, who were all supervised by Sir Harry (F.H.) Hinsley, had this unusual advantage, though Hinsley himself epitomised the fact that the best cast of mind of someone teaching a subject does not emerge from the subject itself but something much larger in scope, out of field. This was also the case with former diplomat Carr. Hinsley's intuitive understanding stemmed entirely from his wartime experience as assistant to the director of cypher breaking at Bletchley Park. He never even completed a degree because of the war. Rooted in the realities of the world, Hinsley typically asked one undergraduate struggling to make sense of the Kaiser in 1914: "But why do you think he was more intelligent than you?"

I would argue that researching International Relations, certainly its history through archives, without languages is like attempting physics without mathematics. My extensive studies of the Soviet Union were predicated on that requirement. The ideas directing international relations emerge from a culture, mostly one much older than that of the United States. Cultures thus matter. And language is the essential way in. Reading memoranda of conversations between two contending parties highlights the problem: it is not actually one conversation but two separate ones, like the branching of an electron in quantum mechanics.

A starting-point was Russian, begun with Linguaphone on my own at sixteen, spurred on subsequently by visiting the USSR by road just before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Knocked back as a fresher a year later, I finally won admission to lunchtime classes on reading "Soviet" Russian (*Pravda*) for research students given by Russian emigrée Nora Gottlieb. She, I discovered, was a friend of People's Commissar Maxim Litvinov's widow, Ivy. The whole Soviet experience suddenly became very real. And it was by gate-crashing Leonard Schapiro's emigré-ridden research seminar in 1970 that I first saw and heard the legendary George Kennan at close quarters: a living embodiment of Russian culture in foreign form. By researching domestic Soviet history, I could have joined Schapiro. But he was entirely uninterested in international relations, although he had done piece-work for Secret Intelligence (MI6). That decision kept me from the influential establishment circle of Isaiah Berlin, Schapiro's patron at All Souls, Oxford, mirrored at St Antony's; a college renowned for MI6 connexions. Instead I chose the other Rome, Cambridge, where E.H. Carr—the enemy of both Berlin and Schapiro—resided as Life Fellow of Trinity.

Having generously taken me in, Carr had little time, however. Only his work made him happy and he was desperate to finish his 14-volume History of Soviet Russia. He really was very patient, however, constantly correcting my mispronunciation of names: "not Chícherin, Chichérin," he repeated until I consistently got it right. But in the end I drove him to exasperation: "You don't expect me to write your thesis for you, do you?", he harrumphed.

This was my abrupt introduction to the British substitute for graduate training. "Just write every day and keep on writing," Carr said. No real progress was thus made until teaching at Birmingham University at twenty-four, when I found myself surrounded by professional Sovietologists. But it had the inestimable advantage of having to research just to keep my head above water in such company. A long stay in Moscow through the British Academy in 1977 then turned out to be a sobering experience of Soviet life that dispelled any lingering illusions.

The career disadvantage was that I had moved even further from the influential Berlin-Schapiro axis; Cambridge by default became my spiritual home.

---

<sup>3</sup> T. Scitovsky, *Welfare and Competition* (London: Routledge, 2003). Written in the tradition of Vilfredo Pareto.

The famous physicist and mathematician, the late Freeman Dyson always thought the Ph.D. an abomination (he never took one). I concluded that research students are better off apprenticing to someone senior and spinning off occasional articles instead. Although Carr gave cursory supervision, researching for him later was a catalytic experience. Carr needed my Spanish, which I had acquired living with Chilean exiles. This was for his history of Comintern (1930-1935 and its sequel).<sup>4</sup> He sent me drafts for comment: a privilege, but also a deeply deflating experience. The raw material that Carr soaked up reappeared digested as text after a week. He set an alarmingly high standard and notoriously mixed acid with his ink in regularly reviewing for the *Times Literary Supplement*. No concession was ever made to ill-judged words from anyone. I could, however, hear him muse about astute tacticians such as Italian Communist Palmiro Togliatti as though he knew them: true *fingerspitzengefühl* in action. I now had some sense of what writing this kind of history required. So that once Carr passed away in 1982, I knew full well what I ought to do and at what speed, but I had no idea precisely how. Life experience at a paltry thirty-one is a long way from that at ninety, after all. It was only when Carr died and the vultures swooped in to tear at what he had left behind that I realised just how polarised the field of Soviet studies actually was. So I took up the task of writing his biography in part to make sense of all this, aided and abetted by Tamara, the widow of Isaac Deutscher.<sup>5</sup>

Escaping Thatcherism, in 1984, I took up a post at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at the heart of empire in Washington D.C.; a thoroughfare for foreign policy but not exactly a place to research and write history. Even the archives had evacuated to Maryland along with any lingering nostalgia for the past. Here I learnt much from interacting with Robert W. Tucker, my patron, who had been trained by the legendary Hans Kelsen at Berkeley, the originator of the “pure theory of law”: law as the product of power, not justice.

Whereas SAIS in those days liked to recruit people in its own conservative image, Tucker favoured the reverse; that is what secured entry for Roger Hansen, Piero Gleijeses, and then myself. The book best reflecting Tucker's erudition and quality of mind, *The Inequality of Nations*, ingeniously illustrates his own Socratic method.<sup>6</sup> Tucker attached himself to the most intelligent – usually the top graduate student – with an antithetical point of view and continually tested his own against theirs: in this instance his foil was Hansen. Shaken by Vietnam, Hansen was an emotionally committed liberal attached to the notion that wealth should be redistributed to less-developed countries. Through sustained debate Tucker could write in a manner that anticipated every argument against the case he was making. The results were well-nigh foolproof. Unfortunately this could leave the interlocutor in an intellectual vacuum. The moral fervor had no outlet. Hansen committed suicide, immortalised by Calvin Trilling, before completing the book he originally intended to write. There were other issues as well, but academia does have its casualties.<sup>7</sup>

Washington D.C. was and is fascinating. It afforded insiders a glimpse into policy. Mikhail Gorbachev's appearance opened prospects for a more meaningful détente than the deceitful façade of the 1970s that ultimately launched Ronald Reagan into the presidency. The roundtable on Soviet studies at Brookings across the road brought together those on the frontline in intelligence analysis and academia, of which there were all too few. In addition, former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown launched a series of candle-lit dinners atop SAIS—where he ran its Foreign Policy Center—hosting Senators like Sam Nunn

---

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Carr, *Twilight of Comintern, 1930-35* (London: Macmillan, 1982), and *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 1999). For more on the Deutschers and Berlin: D. Caute, *Isaac and Isaiah. The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Tucker, *The Inequality of Nations* (New York: Basic, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Trilling, *Remembering Denny* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005)

and Paul Sarbanes along with Reagan's top arms control adviser Paul Nitze, journalists such as Strobe Talbott, Ambassador Raymond Garthoff, and a sprinkling of professors, entirely off the record.

Though out of office, Brown was still in the loop. He had a large pile of classified documents delivered to SAIS early every morning by a uniformed marine and similarly retrieved at the close of the working day. This milieu gave an elevated vantage-point onto a world known only from newspapers; as did private visits to Soviet specialists within hermetically sealed rooms at the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). They worked on the order of battle and lived the USSR without ever actually going there. My only near equivalent experience in Britain was working once a week in 2002 as a temporary clerk to the House of Lords EU Committee Foreign Policy Sub-Committee alongside Charles Powell (Thatcher's foreign policy adviser), Daphne Park (MI6), and Field Marshal Lord Inge.

I was only two years at SAIS and wasted too much time appearing on CNN and NPR. A return with tenure was impossible after Robert Osgood, my strongest supporter, suddenly died. By then I was a guest of the Berkeley-Stanford Program in Soviet Studies under the dual tutelage of husband and wife team Alex Dallin (Stanford) and Gail Lapidus (Berkeley). My friend David Holloway was now there, as was a new discovery, the redoubtable right-winger Robert Conquest. The archives of the Hoover Institution, the best place to research Soviet history, were on the doorstep, making possible daily forays into Soviet era documents. At Berkeley I met Kenneth Waltz; originally an economist by vocation, he spent decades trying to turn international relations into something approaching a science. His theory of the international political system was constructed to be accepted or rejected in toto, not a smörgåsbord nor a plastic model that can be reshaped into something more appealing.<sup>8</sup> But, even for those who cannot accept his model, there is so much lurking in the interstices of the text reflecting on foreign policy that the attentive reader can learn a great deal as well as working out one's own position. Remember that Waltz was also for many years a friend to Realpolitiker Henry Kissinger. There is much in the text that emerges from their informal conversation. California ended with my return to Cambridge in 1988 as Senior Research Fellow in Politics at King's College that led to permanence in the university within three years. Yet, enjoyable though Cambridge was, taking sabbaticals every seventh term to top American universities and their libraries was essential to enrich my research.

A major breakthrough came when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992 and hitherto inaccessible archives suddenly opened. Not only was it possible to verify the authenticity of foreign policy documents already published, it was also an opportunity to explore further. I was drawn into overseeing the declassification of operational archives from the Foreign Ministry—a project spearheaded by the Nobel Institute in Norway. But no sooner did things progress than the régime under Boris Yeltsin succumbed in a couple of years to financial and political corruption. As former Soviet Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin used to say: we hoped for the best, but things turned out as they usually do. In our proceedings we felt a familiar cold draught almost immediately. Yeltsin sought protection under the roof of the former KGB: those like Vladimir Putin drafted in from St Petersburg. Very soon ultimate control of the archives was in the hands of such people. Declassified documents were increasingly withdrawn from access. Working in the Foreign Ministry archive became increasingly unrewarding. At the Party archive on Pushkinskaya the last straw was when they withdrew all deciphered Comintern telegrams as state secrets!

It was time to take leave from things Russian until matters improved. I began researching and writing a history of realist thought in international relations, stimulated by having researched Carr's biography. Understanding Tucker and my friendship with Waltz made a major contribution to the project. Contact with Ernst Haas at Berkeley then opened up the possibility of seeing the project clearly from the angle of the anti-realists. I discovered his unpublished Ph.D. thesis: a

---

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2010).

devastating critique of the Balance of Power based on researching the European states system of the 1830s. Haas was amazed that anyone had even found, let alone read it. It was a pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Sustained efforts by me over six lonely months at Harvard to reach Haas's counterpart, Stanley Hoffmann, utterly failed, for which Hoffmann was deeply apologetic when the book came out and we finally made contact. Hoffmann had cut his teeth on a pathbreaking study of the emergence of international institutions with the same rigour as Haas, similarly driven by powerful political conviction—he was way to the left at the time.<sup>10</sup> These two were the opposite poles of Tucker and Carr. The most fascinating feature of Waltz was that his liberal politics were indistinguishable from those of Hoffmann or Haas, yet his theory was deeply conservative. The same could be argued, with significant differences, for Carr. Such realists were just as much rebels as were their equivalents to the left. But they saw the state in the international system as fundamentally protective of society regardless of the political identity of society itself.

Another foray out of area was the destruction of Salvador Allende's Chile that had intrigued me since 1973. Pinochet had been forced out of office but his shadow fell everywhere. I followed all formal procedures courtesy of the *chargé d'affaires* at the Chilean Embassy in London. But when I arrived in Santiago "la Señora" at the Foreign Ministry Archive said the documents – declassified correspondence between Santiago and ambassadors in Moscow and Havana—did not exist! A Chilean friend who worked elsewhere in the Foreign Ministry was not surprised: "Don't you know what that building is across the courtyard?" It was the intelligence service. I had, however, taken the precaution of debriefing the former British ambassador, Sir Reginald Secondé, a supporter of the coup that overturned Allende. Reggie recommended me to his friend the now powerful Senator Marco Cariola, who had once served as bagman for CIA, carrying the cash from the U.S. embassy to the striking truck-drivers in 1972. Cariola was close to Pinochet and a member of the parliamentary international relations committee. He kindly wrote a letter for me to "la Señora." On Monday she was all smiles: everything was in the room next door. I also interviewed James Schlesinger, formerly Secretary of Defense and director of CIA who, off the record, told me precisely how the White House orchestrated the coup. What all this illustrates is obvious: with contemporary history, you need to acquire contacts close to the top. Henry Kissinger at a meeting in New York gruffly berated me, saying I could not possibly know anything. But once he had seen my account, at our second encounter he wisely dropped the subject.

In writing *Russia's Cold War*, my friendship with Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov's foreign policy aide Vladimir Erofeev enabled me to peek behind the curtain during the early Cold War.<sup>11</sup> And on sabbatical at Yale courtesy of Paul Kennedy, I befriended William Odom, formerly Zbigniew Brzezinski's military adviser. It was Odom, invited to stay in Cambridge, who told me over after dinner drinks how Brzezinski lured the Russians into invading Afghanistan in December 1979. He immediately realised what he had done and I promised to keep his name out of the text. That promise lapsed when he suddenly died.

At the Institute for Advanced Study I have latterly been working on the struggle between Bolshevism and anti-Bolshevism to explain the origins of World War II. What fascinates me in particular are the unwritten assumptions underlying policy that cannot be seen in official documents. By definition they are shared by everyone except ourselves, the researchers. And how can one know without seeing private papers, and in particular through access to the despatches of foreign powers? It goes to show how much more there always is to learn and the importance of foreign languages to make it possible. The book will appear next year with Princeton University Press.

---

<sup>9</sup> E. Haas, *A Critical Examination of some Balance of Power Theories in the Light of the Policy Motivations of the Major European States toward Belgium, 1830-1839* (Columbia University PhD 1953).

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, *Organisations internationales et Pouvoirs politiques des États* (Paris: A. Colin, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Looking back, it all seems like a chapter of accidents. But after a while, working in various foreign archives and by no means just Russian archives, one does need to develop an inner sense of what is plausible, and what is not. This sixth sense is needed not just with respect to Russia. As a researcher in foreign policy archives, one has to regard the archivists, however agreeable, as working for the enemy of truth: for civil servants who like to keep their secrets and for private interests (the leading aristocratic houses of Britain and, above all, the highly secretive monarchy) who do the same. Why else does Italy, for example, have a fifty year rule of disclosure? Why are Francisco Franco's papers concealed from us in a "private" archive? Why does the Vatican Secret Archive claim it has declassified material for the entire interwar period that when you apply for it in the reading room is all unfortunately unavailable? Why does the official history of MI6 stop well before 1949 when the title suggests otherwise, and why cannot we check what it says? Why did the British deny they had any documents on the massacres in colonial Kenya when in fact they were hidden away near the town of Milton Keynes? Governments, all governments, lie about things all the time and hope you will not find them out, even when they have passed away.

And with respect to Moscow, in particular: for a very long time the Soviet authorities produced edited versions of diplomatic documents, mainly deciphered telegrams between embassies and the centre. They were essential. There were two crucial problems with these, however, invaluable though they were. First, did the telegram tell the whole story? In a noted instance—namely the Merekalov-Weizsäcker soundings in the spring of 1939 that set off the trail to the Nazi-Soviet pact—they did not. So one historian in particular who thought the telegram proved the conversations were just about trade was later shown to be wrong. Why was the telegram not definitive? Because the Russians suspected, wrongly in this instance, that their communications were being intercepted and deciphered. The full account of the meeting went instead by courier straight to Moscow.

Second, all references to the Communist International and later the international department of the central committee, which drove the revolutionary side of foreign policy, were removed from published diplomatic documents, in order to fit in with the prevailing dogma established by Vladimir Lenin that the Soviet Government had nothing to do with Comintern. I gave up co-editing a series of documents on Russo-American relations because my Russian colleague could not or would not get over that hurdle. Here no compromise on my part was acceptable.

The other necessary course of action was to work in every available diplomatic archive that could shed light on Soviet behaviour, so if reading in foreign languages may be seen as a bit of a luxury for someone studying the history of international relations of, say, the United States, it was an absolute necessity in studying Soviet foreign policy. Even today, when the Russians are more liberal in their censorship of documentary publications, one has to verify where possible through other sources independent of Moscow. And although Comintern's archives are available on the web, most of it them are still closed to the reader, even though officially declassified, and much of it is in German only. One always has to ask, what has been cut out deliberately?

In doing this kind of work I never paid attention to what others in the West were doing unless they were working the same seam as I was. Most historians of the Soviet Union from the 1960s—Robert Conquest, R.W. Davies, Moshe Lewin, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen Cohen, Orlando Figes—steered well clear of foreign policy. They did not think it relevant, which was extremely unwise, given that the First World War gave them the October Revolution, the tensions of the interwar gave them Stalin and the Second World War gave them the Soviet bloc and the Cold War. The battles between Maoists and pro-Soviet Marxists, between the Marxists and the revisionists, between the latter two and the Schapiro-Berlin people thus effectively passed me by in the work I did. So my attention to what they said and wrote in their extensive polemics was marginal except where it intruded on my domain.

**Jonathan Haslam** is the George F. Kennan Professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and a Fellow of the British Academy. His most recent book is *Near and Distant Neighbors. A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). His latest work is a history of the origins of the Second World War with particular attention to the role of Communism and anti-Communism.