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Learning the Scholar's Craft

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It is an honor to join my distinguished colleagues in relating my career as an historian; but it is also a daunting task to create a useful and coherent narrative of the paths I have followed.

We are all children of our times, and certainly the twentieth century's wars, genocides, social protests, and economic upheaval shaped my consciousness; but my family did as well. Let me start with my grandmother, who thrilled me with the language and landscape of her pre-World War I village in southeastern Poland (that I would visit a century later). Let me also thank my parents for the trip to Québec that stirred my wonder at exploring historic places and my enchantment with the French language.

Above all, let me express profound gratitude to my birthplace, New York City, for the libraries, museums, theaters, and concert halls that provided joy and enlightenment, and for the buses and subways that carried me to after-school and summer jobs where I learned the world of commercial insurance, copyright and patent law, high-end liquor imports, and office-building materials; to my volunteer stints in hospitals, the Red Cross, and with deaf children; and to enchanting destinations such as the ocean ships docked in New York harbor, the Cloisters, and Coney Island.

I also thank my teachers: Howard Shaw at the Bronx High School of Science for encouraging unorthodox intellectual views, Hsi-Huey Liang and Heinrich Blücher at Bard for asking the hard questions and Ralph Ellison for his kindness and friendship, and my Ph.D. advisor Hans W. Gatzke at Yale for his extraordinary understanding and support when I followed my own path.

I'm often asked, "why German history"? At an early age I was drawn to this subject not only because of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust but also because of my immersion in the literature, poetry, and music of Central Europe and my questions about a people riven by religious and social conflicts, diverse regimes, shifting boundaries, and clashing narratives of national direction and identity. As a student I sought unexplored issues in German history. Thus, in my Bard senior thesis, intrigued by the Allied Control Council's accusatory language in its dissolution of the state of Prussia in 1947, I attempted to revise the mythology of the warrior-absolutist-bureaucratic state.

The 1960s were an auspicious time to study diplomatic history because of the availability of the captured German government records on microfilm for the period between 1867 and 1945.¹ This was also a time of lively political and scholarly debates. While German historians threshed out Fritz Fischer's thesis of an expansionist Second Reich as prelude to the Third, A. J. P. Taylor's revisionist interpretation of the origins of World War II, and Ralf Dahrendorf's formulation

¹ A useful summary of the extensive microfilmed collections at that time in John A. Bernbaum, "The Captured German Records: A Bibliographical Survey," *The Historian* 32:4 (August 1970): 564-575.

of a German “special path” (*Sonderweg*) to modernization,² U.S. historians, aroused by the Vietnam War, debated the course of American expansionism³ and Soviet scholars, inspired by George Kennan’s perceptive analysis,⁴ revised the orthodox view of Moscow’s Cold War behavior by drawing on Russian history and Soviet domestic politics..

In my doctoral dissertation I examined the Weimar Republic’s championship of minority rights between 1919 and 1933. Undoubtedly, some elements of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann’s revisionist diplomacy linked the policies of the Second and Third Reichs. However, the minorities issue was more complicated. The Berlin-led campaign in the League of Nations for internationally guaranteed minority protection, joined by Jewish and other ethnic groups, was seconded by interwar human-rights and peace activists. And it was decisively blocked by the Western colonial powers and by League of Nations officials even before the Nazi regime distorted the cause of minority rights. Although group rights were not resurrected by the United Nations, when the Cold War ended the international community turned in favor of protecting minorities against the depredations of nation states.

My professional path was also shaped by overseas travel, beginning with a four-month solo journey in 1961 to Europe – a continent that was still recovering from World War II, experiencing the height of the Cold War, and wracked by the often-violent end of its overseas empires. Privileged to meet students of many nationalities as well as witnesses to the recent past. I made lifelong friends. Also, by visiting sites such as Natzweiler-Struthof and Lidice, Yalta and the Berlin Wall, I gained indelible impressions. A full year in Europe in 1963-64 added even more. Studying at University of Basel fortified my German and led to more friendships, introduced me to the delights of the city’s museums, opera, ballet, theater, and chamber music, and brought new work experiences as an English teacher and translator (as well as first my small acting role in an amateur university play) along with new travel opportunities, including my first international conference in Karlovy Vary on the European resistance.

The opening of several diplomatic archives in the 1970s enabled me to become an international historian and embark on the first study in a half century of the Genoa Conference of 1922.⁵ Moving beyond the scholarly consensus that had dismissed this 34-nation summit as a chimerical project of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George - or merely the backdrop to the infamous Rapallo treaty - I discovered that the diplomats at Genoa grappled with fundamental postwar economic and political problems and that their failure to renegotiate peace in Central and Eastern Europe and a truce with Soviet Russia had significant consequences.

While working on Genoa, a serendipitous moment occurred when I discovered the unfinished World War I memoir by Marc Bloch: a scholar I had long admired. And while preparing a translation and an extended introduction for publication,⁶

² Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik der kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914-18* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961); Abridged Eng. Translation: *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967); A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum, 1961); Ralf Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (München: Piper, 1965); English translation: *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

³ Among them William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (World Publishing Co. 1959); Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1965* (New York: Random House, 1968).

⁴ George Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961); see also Roger D. Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956-1974* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵ Carole Fink, *The Genoa Conference: European Diplomacy, 1921-1922* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), new ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

⁶ Marc Bloch, *Memoirs of War, 1914-15*, trans. and introduction by Carole Fink (Ithac: Cornell University Press, 1980), new ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

I was privileged to meet Bloch's family, obtain access to his letters and papers, and interview his former students and World War II resistance comrades, whereupon I realized that a full biography was necessary to elucidate the life of this formidable scholar and courageous patriot. Moving well beyond my training – and fully conscious of this inspiring but also challenging professional 'deviation' – I examined Bloch's contributions to medieval, economic, cultural, and comparative history along with the political and intellectual environment that had formed this revered but largely unknown - and up to then mythologized – figure.⁷ And I emerged profoundly broadened in my scholarship, teaching, and sensibility from this unexpected and enduring encounter.

As an international historian, I have greatly benefited from the comradeship of fellow scholars, beginning with the 1975 Locarno-Era conference organized by Dean David Knisley at Mars Hill College in North Carolina that for three lively days assembled several dozen 'archive rats' working on the 1920s and 30s. Later, when I became the U.S. board member of the Association *Internationale d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Europe*, headed by Jacques Bariéty and A. O. Chubarian, I worked intensely with research scholars on both sides of the Iron Curtain, preparing our annual meetings and publications on Cold War - and subsequently - post-Cold War Europe.

My vistas have also been expanded by the many places I have come to know in the U.S. and abroad. In the U.S. I have lived in upstate New York, southeastern North Carolina, Central Tennessee, and Central Ohio. I also spent two fascinating years in the late 1980s in Washington, D.C. where, in addition to my research, writing, and teaching, I followed congressional hearings, attended Supreme Court sessions, took part in the lively and informative sessions at the Woodrow Wilson International Center Scholars, and undertook a successful lobbying mission to end a family's long wait to exit from the Soviet Union. And in addition to my research trips to some fourteen countries, I acquired my love for hiking under the southern skies of New Zealand and southern Chile.

My many years in the classroom have contributed to my education as an historian. Before retiring in 2011 I taught for forty-six years at U.S. colleges and universities and afterward have done visiting stints in Israel, Germany, China, and Australia. Teaching the survey courses in European history and Modern Jewish history broadened my horizons, and my classes in twentieth-century international history - with their ever-longer chronology and broader global range - grew livelier with the incorporation of international relations theories and economics, social, cultural, and gender elements. My beloved historiography seminars – passing on the tools and background of our craft – certainly owed much to Bloch. My students have been a constant inspiration, delighting me with their questions, their growth, and their interactions with each other. And at Ohio State I was thrilled to watch my graduate students teach classes with wit and finesse, write accomplished theses and dissertations, and embark upon their professional careers.

Let me also pay tribute to my departmental colleagues at several institutions for our productive debates over textbooks and curriculum and for our stimulating research brown bag lunches. I am profoundly grateful to The Ohio State University's interdisciplinary centers, especially the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, which also became the intellectual home of my Ph.D. students and my postdocs from Japan, Russia, and Canada.

At crucial moments in my research, I have been aided by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Association of University Women, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the German Marshall Fund of the United States. I received Fulbright research fellowships to Australia and Israel. I have also had the privilege of residential fellowships at the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Institute for Advanced Studies Princeton, where I was honored to become reacquainted with George Kennan.

I have continued to work at the margins of untouched subjects, learning new languages, probing new questions, and attempting to transcend traditional national and disciplinary borders. Returning to my Yale dissertation, in *Defending the*

⁷ Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

*Rights of Others*⁸ I examined the sixty-year period when minority rights entered the international arena. In *West Germany and Israel*⁹ I moved beyond a prickly bilateral diplomatic relationship to explore the historical and international context. And in my current work, on the Soviet-Jewish migration to West Germany *before* 1990, I am not only reexamining the complicated story of these migrants' exit from the Soviet Union but also their choice of settling in the 'land of the murderers,' as well as the erratic (but generally permissive) responses of the Schmidt and Kohl governments.¹⁰

I have published over sixty articles and chapters on a variety of topics, among them biographical essays,¹¹ studies in contemporary historiography,¹² cultural history,¹³ and historical pedagogy,¹⁴ and an interpretation of the Weimar Republic.¹⁵ Perhaps my most important professional projects have been the co-editing of seven volumes: on German nationalism, European reconstruction after World War I, European frontiers, international human rights, the global 1968, the revolutionary year 1956, and *Ostpolitik* in Europe and the world. Long ago, Bloch appealed for collaborative work across national boundaries; and I believe that bringing together various national viewpoints and expertise remains one of our foremost personal and scholarly responsibilities.

After my retirement, I was encouraged to reach a larger audience. With *Cold War: An International History*¹⁶ I have attempted to move beyond a two-dimensional narrative of Superpower conflict to incorporate new insights into the long global competition fueled by ideology and old-fashioned great-power rivalry as well as by specific local and regional circumstances. And in the new essays in *Writing 20th Century History* I delved into historiography and also re-examined several previous research endeavors.¹⁷

⁸ Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1978-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹ Fink, *West Germany and Israel: Foreign Relations, Domestic Politics and the Cold War, 1965-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ A preliminary account in "The Unexpected Arrivals: Soviet Jews in West Berlin, 1974-1975," *International History Review* 43:2 (2021): 475-87.

¹¹ Fink, "Franz Kafka and the Dilemma of Ethnic Nationalism," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 8:1 (Spring 1981): 17-36.

¹² Fink, "A New Historian?" *Contemporary European History* 14:1 (2005): 135-147.

¹³ Fink, "1958: The Prague Spring Music Festival Joins Europe," in *Une Europe malgré tout, 1945-1990: Contacts et réseaux culturels, intellectuels et scientifiques entre Européens dans la guerre froide*, ed. Antoine Fleury and Lubor Jílek (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009): 345-363.

¹⁴ Fink, "Teaching the History of Cold War Europe," in *Understanding and Teaching the Cold War*, ed. Matthew Masur (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017): 13-28.

¹⁵ Fink, "Between the Second and Third Reichs: The Weimar Republic as Imperial Interregnum," in *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997): 261-285.

¹⁶ Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014), 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2017), 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2021).

¹⁷ Fink, *Writing 20th Century International History: Explorations and Examples* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017).

To be sure, much has changed since I entered the profession. We no longer scribble our notes on 4 x 6 index cards, wait weeks for replies to our overseas inquiries, and return home with microfilm and photocopies. Now, with access to online inventories and even digitized collections, our travel time has been greatly reduced. But also, as 'desk scholars' - and more recently, as Zoom lecturers and webinar participants - we have lost some of the immediacy, context, and human contact that expanded our imagination and enjoyment.

On a conceptual level, some of the old debates have either been deepened or enlarged to include other disciplines. Nonetheless, I believe we remain separate from the theorists: an issue-oriented craft that tolerates complexity and is wary of tidy, parsimonious explanations of human behavior. International historians have become globalists, acquiring new tools and languages. But we are also confronting new challenges, among them powerful competitors in the media that deal selectively with the past, amplifying distortions and erasing inconvenient parts; and we are facing audiences that are often unready to delve into complex issues. Moreover, we increasingly recognize the gaps and bias of written records, the vagaries of language, and the imperfections of memory. Admitting the tentativeness of our conclusions and acknowledging that revisions are inevitable, I believe that what remains solid is the old Marc Bloch prescription in *The Historian's Craft*: like the monster in the fairy tale, we continue to search far and deep for the human traces we report as best as we can.

I am deeply grateful for the gifts of old and new friendships that have sustained and enriched my days and for the adventures that life has brought. Finally let me thank my two children, both of whom have overcome considerable obstacles in their lives and have always been a joy and an inspiration.

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