

The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

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Review by John Ferris, University of Calgary

This is a solid work by any standard. It starts with a brief but judicious assessment of some foundations for the study of international history, such as the nature of causation and interpretation and recent theories of history and International Relations (IR). Then, through several case studies, Trachtenberg demonstrates how to parse relevant secondary works, how to criticize the interpretations of others and to offer your own. These examples demonstrate how research is guided by intuition, memory, logic, and serendipity, and illustrate how evidence and rhetoric are combined to make cases or to kill them. Finally, Trachtenberg discusses how to define a viable research topic, locate secondary literature, find primary documents in several countries, and turn evidence into text. Any graduate student working in international history can profit from this book: I wish something similar had been available when I started in strategic history. Yet if the work thus achieves its aims, it still remains open to criticism.

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Trachtenberg does not define the field he describes. He ignores any form of postmodern IR or history. True, many of these schools do not do international history, as Trachtenberg (or I) would understand it, let alone do what it does, only better. Instead, they address other topics and name them international history, often with the aim of delegitimizing its older forms. Yet students of international history might encounter these bodies of thought, and they must learn of others which do affect our literature. The latter include the neo-realist, liberal, and constructivist schools of IR; work inspired by the 'linguistic turn' view that language or ideas order our comprehension of reality; and the concepts about the relationship between evidence, perceptions, and decisions which are embraced by contemporary scholars of intelligence. Trachtenberg does address some of these matters, but less systematically than is necessary for his audience.

Historians are not innocent of ideas, just naïve about them. Students will gain from knowing which concepts they have at their disposal, and which ones possess them. They will profit from understanding that power can be defined variously as current military capacity (John Mearsheimer), as relative economic strength in the long term (Paul Kennedy), or as the outcome, often mystified, of struggles for personal, political and social dominance within states (Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci or E. P. Thompson), and that it may be measured in different ways. Most international historians today combine liberal

and realist views, and some could be called liberal constructivist realists; students would do well to know the meaning of these elemental ideas about international relations, and of their alloys.

Moreover, Trachtenberg implicitly defines international history as being diplomatic history, without discussing what that is or how else the subject might be understood. Diplomatic history, with its focus on the relations of senior decision makers within and between states, is a proud profession. The study of politics, diplomacy, and strategy are the oldest forms of history, first mastered by Thucydides and central to the modern discipline which emerged two centuries ago. But after 1960, diplomatic history began a decline. Though a grim band of veterans, led by giants such as Paul Schroeder and Zara Steiner, stood to inspire newcomers, the discipline became marginalized, vulnerable to accusations of focusing on superficial rather than substantial matters or of embodying the Dead White European Male in academe. Once a multi-archival, multi-national, and multi-linguistic enterprise, it shrank into schools of national diplomatic history, haunted by a collapse in the comprehension of languages and the sometimes sectarian and parochial nature of the study of American foreign relations.

Yet in the last decade diplomatic history has perceptibly recovered and the field has also been enriched in other ways. One is through the study of the international relations of non-state actors, whether intellectuals, churches, or mass media; another is through work on the interplay between power, culture, sentiment, and politics. Yet another stems from the renaissance in military history: strategic history now fuses military and international history, assessing such things as military policy in peacetime and diplomacy in war, what power is and what it can and cannot do.¹ Yet another contribution comes from the sub-field of intelligence, with its distinctive approach to evidence, perceptions and ideas as means to understand how and why actions are taken. International history equals diplomatic history, transformed by interaction with new provinces such as these.

The import of these observations can be shown by applying them to Trachtenberg's main case study on the origins of the Pacific War, and by criticizing his argument according to his own prescribed methods. Through his close reading of secondary works, Trachtenberg rejects the standard view that Japanese aims were belligerent and American policy defensive. Instead, applying the central insight of strategic studies that the distribution of power and the structure of systems drive the actions of polities seeking to further their security, he argues that the United States practised power politics like any other nation; moreover, rather than trying just to defend weak and endangered countries or to deter Tokyo from aggression, Washington drove a reluctant Japan to war—and it did so intentionally. In fact, Trachtenberg ascribes to the United States a greater and more aggressive role in causing war in 1941 than Germany had in 1914, according to his critique of the work of Fritz Fischer (67-73).

¹ For further discussion, see John Ferris, 'Power, Strategy, Armed Forces and War', in Patrick Finney (ed), *Palgrave Advances in International History* (London: Palgrave, 2005) 58-79.

Trachtenberg rightly distinguishes his argument that Washington drove Tokyo to war from the conspiracy theory that Franklin Roosevelt knowingly let Japan attack Pearl Harbor. Instead, he claims that had Roosevelt aimed simply at deterrence or containment, 'Japan was clearly willing to be contained' (115). But he had greater ambitions: rollback. Roosevelt believed that a total oil embargo would drive Japan to attack the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), which would necessarily create a Pacific war rather than a localized one, and so, with the application of that embargo, he 'deliberately opted for a policy which he knew would in all probability lead to war with Japan' (100). American authorities also rejected an effort by the Japanese Prime Minister Prince Konoye to solve mutual differences through a meeting with Roosevelt—which might have succeeded since Konoye was 'searching desperately' for a way to avoid war (110)—and a later Japanese proposal for a *modus vivendi*, involving a withdrawal of their troops from Indochina and pursuit of a negotiated peace in China. Roosevelt took these steps largely so that Japan would attack the United States and provide a pretext for war with Nazi Germany, which he regarded (correctly) as a deadly threat to American security that must immediately be addressed.

This case rests on Trachtenberg's reading of the literature about the outbreak of the Pacific War, which is somewhat problematic. The most striking characteristic of this literature is its division into self-contained fields. Some of these divisions are thematic (military, diplomatic, etc.) but the greatest are those between different national international histories. Given the barriers of language, it is perhaps not surprising that the Japanese literature is distinct, but writing on the United States and the United Kingdom also often stands in isolation, as does that on the Netherlands, the Dominions, the USSR, and China. Trachtenberg understands the American diplomatic history literature, but not the British one, where he uses Christopher Thorne's magisterial *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain, and the War Against Japan, 1941-1945* but overlooks more recent work by Antony Best or the Anglo Japanese History Project.² His bibliography on Japanese decisions is small, but if it includes most major works published in English it excludes a controversial but serious polemic which challenges his position.³ Finally, the discussion of the specialist literature on intelligence is inadequate. Trachtenberg ignores the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor and the standard works on the topic—even though he must know them—which offer the best analyses of the preconceptions about Japan which shaped American policy.⁴ He misses two excellent monographs on British intelligence and Japan, while

² Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941-1945* (London: Hamilton, 1978); Antony Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor: Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936-41* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ian Nish and Yoichi Kibata (eds), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1600-2000. Volume Two: The Political-Diplomatic Dimension, 1931-2000* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

³ Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

⁴ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Gordon W. Prange, with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981) and *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986); Henry Claussen and Bruce Lee, *Pearl Harbor: Final Judgement* (New York: Crown, 1992).

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directing students toward a discredited piece of Pearl Harbor conspiracy theory.⁵ He also seems unaware that since 1995 the United States and United Kingdom have opened almost all previously closed intelligence files on the events of 1941. The intelligence record is no longer unknown, even if it is often still overlooked.

In developing his interpretation of responsibility for the Pacific War, Trachtenberg thus follows a spotty map across rough terrain. Moreover, to assess the precise causal significance of any actor involved in a complex event is hard, because all influence the outcome—even someone who struggles against a particular outcome can be held responsible for doing so insufficiently well. Thus Luigi Albertini blamed Britain for shaping the outbreak of the Great War because of what it did not do but should have done during the July crisis. The issue is also complicated because historians define causation in conflicting ways. Should only new developments which change old patterns be classed as causes? Should one be held responsible only for outcomes which one intends, or for whatever effects flow from one's actions? Or for any outcomes which one should have known were possible or probable? If one reacts in a predictable, normal, manner to the behaviour of another, did they cause your actions or are you responsible for what you did?⁶ Each definition has some force and the trick is to determine which is applicable when. In multilateral relationships, intention and effect become even more tangled. Some events occur by design, but more occur by mistake or through systems failures. Effects occur which no one had wished. In a game with five players, a good stroke against one rival may alarm a third and lead them to bump a fourth into deflecting one's shot—perhaps towards one's own net. Confusion over such issues hampers Trachtenberg's case.

Trachtenberg's assessment of Japanese policy is skewed. He is right to argue that Japanese decisions were affected by those of other countries, and might have changed had American policy done so. Still, it does seem odd that after criticizing A. J. P. Taylor for arguing that Adolf Hitler did not really cause German actions, Trachtenberg should then suggest the Japanese did not start the Pacific War—the devil made them do it. Of course, American diplomatic historians often assume that the United States must have governed any bilateral relationship in which it was involved, which produces odd views such as the old New Left one that the USSR was not really responsible for its own actions in the early Cold War. But during 1941 Washington did not determine Japanese actions; it merely shaped them, as Tokyo shaped American behaviour in turn. Japanese decisions were made in Tokyo where, the specialist literature generally concludes, most decision makers were belligerent and committed to—or unwilling to abandon - a policy they knew would likely cause a war with

⁵ Richard Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914-1941* (London: Palgrave, 2002); James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor: How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into World War II* (New York: Summit Books 1991).

⁶ The classic assessment of these issues is W. H. Dray, 'Concepts of Causation in A. J. P. Taylor's Account of The Origins of the Second World War', *History and Theory*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1978, 149-74.

some or all of the western powers.

Trachtenberg tries to discredit this dominant view through sleight of hand. He claims that it hinges on crude assumptions about military predominance in Japanese politics, hits a caricature of it and leaves the unwary to imagine it is dispatched when it is in fact barely scratched. Then he directs students from that literature toward a minority one, consisting essentially of four writers whose views he does not criticize. Two of them, the British and American ambassadors in Tokyo during 1941, Sir Robert Craigie and Joseph Grew, understood much about Japan and saw where it was heading but also routinely overestimated the power of 'liberal' elements. Hence they must be treated with caution as witnesses, as most historians have done for decades. The third source is a fifty year old book by Paul Schroeder, a pioneering effort based on western documents and evidence from the International Military Tribunal at Tokyo. Oddly, Trachtenberg rejects Schroeder's authority on the issue he knew best—American policy—but accepts it on that he understood least well—Japanese policy. Tsunoda Jun, the last of these sources, is an authority on Japanese policy, but one whose views are at odds with the dominant opinion.

In this context, the answer to the question of whether the Konoye proposal or that for a *modus vivendi* could have facilitated a rapprochement must be: perhaps, but not so easily as Trachtenberg assumes. The United States refused these proposals partly because to accept them would have alarmed both China and Britain, states Washington needed to keep firm so they would hold Japan in check. The *modus vivendi* could easily have undermined Chiang Kai-shek's position, which is why Britain opposed it; and given everything they knew, it does seem hard to blame Winston Churchill and Roosevelt for refusing to make concessions to a belligerent Japan and to assist its unpleasant occupation of China. In any case, as happened with Admiral Kurusu's talks in Washington, such negotiations might simply have been used as cover for a Japanese attack. Students who peruse the literature as a whole may reasonably conclude that Japan was more likely to go to war than Trachtenberg suggests and less potentially susceptible to a reasoned American policy, which reduces the significance of Roosevelt's intentions as a cause for Japanese actions.

Nor are Roosevelt's intentions easy to assess. Trachtenberg assumes that outcomes emerged as a result of willed aims and conscious action, and therefore can be inferred from the workings of the American—and even the British—machine of state. In fact, these machines functioned in a chaotic fashion during 1940-41 because the two states suddenly confronted unprecedented problems of strategic policy, which drew many organisations and agencies into new relationships at home and abroad. Britain and the United States became allies without an alliance. Their organisations, shackled up in an intimate and illicit embrace, tripped over each other; moreover, Churchill and Roosevelt assumed control from their bureaucracies on the most central issues and dealt with them within their personal bilateral relationship. At the same time, Japan was overall regarded as a secondary matter, with policy consequently often left on autopilot. Trachtenberg takes decision making for granted, describing this confusion but using evidence drawn from it to depict a rational actor executing his intentions. Yet this confusion distorted rational

decisions, and the relationship of intention and effect.

Trachtenberg also treats all statesmen as ‘diplomatic man’—rational actors who understood power and practised power politics in the same ways, in line with the dictates of realism. Though he accepts that non-realist thinking can affect statesmen, he dislikes the notion and seeks to minimize its significance, often in odd ways. Thus he attacks the argument that American leaders could ever have been affected by sentiments of liberalism, legalism, or morality by conflating it with the larger idea ‘that policy makers were prisoners of America’s liberal ideology, that they had to stand up for their moral beliefs, and that they were incapable of conducting a policy based on realist principles’ (122), and then by identifying occasions when American leaders thought as realists. This argument hits a straw man and misses its real target. Critics do not claim that American decisions were entirely liberal and never realist, rather that they were shaped by both currents, and too much by liberalism. This argument cannot be refuted simply by locating random instances of realist thinking, but only by assessing the latter’s interaction with ideology.

International historians characteristically find difficulties with this matter. They posit a conflict between ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’, even though realism is a form of idealism if ever there was one. When they say ‘idealism’ international historians usually mean ‘liberalism’, but that is merely one of many ideologies. Nor is ideology a dirty word. It is a fact of statesmanship. Ideology conditions our means to know the world and hence to shape it, our views of power, interest, force, of the game and its rules. Realism is essential to the understanding and the playing of power politics, and the ways the former shapes the latter. But it tells you how to play games, not which ones or why. Realism describes power and means, but it cannot define values or the ends they mandate. A pure realist, aiming at power and victory for their own sake alone, is a psychopath. Few statesmen are—none in the period before the Pacific War. Almost all statesmen merge realism with some form of values which join means to ends. The realism of real statesmen combines ideology and an understanding of instrumentality. By removing ideology from this alloy analysts do not derive a purer form of realism, they destroy it. They reduce statesmanship to gamesmanship, just as removing copper from the smelt leaves not better bronze, but tin. Realism is a noun in search of a qualifying adjective, whether ‘Marxist-Leninist’, ‘national socialist’ or ‘liberal’.⁷

These difficulties, and a failure to treat perceptions as problematic, haunt Trachtenberg’s interpretation, especially of Japanese policy. He denies that Japanese leaders could have wished to fight the United States, because they should have known they were outweighed and must lose:

When you look at that view of an uncontainable and undeterrable Japan, part of you says, ‘it just can’t be, states just don’t behave that way’—a reaction that shows that a certain theory of international

⁷ For further discussion, see John Ferris, ‘Image and Accident: Intelligence and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1941’, in John Ferris, *Intelligence and Strategy: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2005) 99-137.

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politics has come into play. Everyone knew that in terms of mobilizable war potential, the United States was a vastly stronger country than Japan. The figures for steel production, for example, were common knowledge at the time. So why, you say to yourself, would a country like Japan, already bogged down in a war with China, insist on pursuing a policy of expansion knowing full well that there was a very good chance that it would lead directly to war with America? It's hard to believe that the Japanese government—or any government, for that matter—would behave that way, no matter what a series of distinguished scholars say. Of course, you are not certain on those general grounds that that view of an uncontrollable Japan is wrong. There is no guarantee that countries will behave rationally. But your sense for how international politics works makes you reluctant to accept that argument on faith. (103-104)

If the Japanese had really thought in this way, or only in this way, they would never have gone to war at all; but they did. Nor were they alone in making such errors. The influence of ideology and perception meant that during 1938-41 the leaders of every major state constantly interpreted power in different ways, failed to effect their intentions, and made mistakes on fundamental issues. Instead of realists behaving rationally, the record shows statesmen behaving badly. They did not act as we would expect by the dictates of our fusion of realism, liberalism, and materialism. Instead, culture and ideology entered their equations. We cannot understand how these statesmen acted without considering how they thought.

Trachtenberg also tries to explain Roosevelt's policy without examining his preconceptions or those of his subordinates. By 1941, American decision makers were irritated with Japan and eager to rein it in. They regarded Japanese leaders as rational and cautious—unlikely to start a war they must know they would lose—and their armed forces as formidable close to home but unable to strike far away. Until 7 December 1941 no one imagined Japan could attack as far as it did, or as hard, or in so many places at once. For most of 1941 Roosevelt and his naval, military and diplomatic officials doubted that Japan would dare fight the United States, as opposed to attack the NEI—which, pace Trachtenberg, need not have meant war with the United States or even Britain. Nor did Roosevelt necessarily have just one aim—statesmen often act so as to create a range of options from which they can select in an opportunistic fashion. Roosevelt probably moved with many aims in mind. He pressed Japan because he was tired of its belligerence and wanted to send it a signal, which he thought could be done without much risk of war. He pursued deterrence, containment, and rollback all at once, because he was not sure which would work best, and differentiated less clearly between them than we do.

Roosevelt thought Japan would back down rather than attack, because he overestimated his bargaining position and underestimated both Japan's ability to strike out of area and its recklessness. (The biggest intelligence failure of 7 December 1941 occurred in Tokyo, not Washington.) Mistakes and systems failure shaped the outbreak of the Pacific War as much as calculation and the intentions which most mattered were those of Tokyo. This argument saps Trachtenberg's line, though not entirely. Roosevelt must always have known that his actions might make Japan attack the United States, and he was willing to accept that risk, or opportunity. The possibility seemed increasingly likely in the weeks before 7 December, doubly so when Britain and the United States rejected the *modus vivendi*, but such an

attack was expected to occur in the spring of 1942 when great reinforcements would have bolstered British and American power in the theatre and the target of December 1941 was expected to be Thailand.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt's subordinates and the British jostled his elbow, but not quite in the manner Trachtenberg suggests. The British would have liked to entangle the United States in an alliance, but knew this could not be done directly. They tried to avoid appearing to manipulate Washington, but did so by following its line, going not one step further than it did. Whitehall was also driven toward a hard line because it needed to buy time to check an immediate threat, to keep Chiang Kai-shek in office and China fighting Japan, and to overcome the impact on Washington of the image of appeasement. These imperatives did buffet American policy, but Britain's real significance was not as subject but object. The United States sought to sustain Britain until Nazi Germany was defeated, whereas Japan wished to devour a rich, weak, and malevolent neighbor, to exploit an opportunity which comes once in a thousand years while the world seemed ready to turn upside down. Japan underestimated American and overrated German power. Its leaders expected Germany to transform the world and contain the United States, just as American policy makers feared it might; this shared assessment spurred both states toward the Pacific War. Both sides made mistakes, but the Japanese made more.

The thrust of these observations is to support Trachtenberg's mode of analysis, but only part of his argument. This is a story without heroes or villains, a world of states using strength to pursue interests, acting on and driven by their reading of power, caught in a tangled web of causation where nothing worked as anyone intended and paradox was king. Japan attacked so as to preempt a threat it had provoked. Like German decision makers in 1914, American ones in 1941 acted in ways they knew might force another side into war, but with a greater degree of confusion. Roosevelt, expecting to coerce a weaker state, instead pushed Japan toward war. He did so by combining present weakness and hostility with a looming and potentially fatal menace. This effect was not quite what he planned, but he could live with the outcome because it realized a greater aim: to have Germany bring the United States into a European war. The effect he did not intend let him achieve the intention he could not otherwise effect.