



Introducing –a new H-Diplo feature on international history

Welcome to the International History Spotlight! The Spotlight is a column on H-Diplo designed to stimulate a dialogue about the contours of “international history.” Who are “international” historians, and what are they writing? How are the methodologies and lines of inquiry unfolding? As an Internet-based source of commentary and analysis, the IHS aims to use the flexibility of an electronic format to draw attention to a wide range of materials – research programs, journal articles, and even web sites of potential interest to list members.

The Spotlight will be distributed in e-mail form to readers of H-Diplo, but fully formatted versions will also be posted and archived at the [H-Diplo web site](#). Substantive responses by list members will be archived together with the original columns. Columns of the IHS fall under the general editorial direction of William Glenn Gray (Purdue University), with editorial participation by David R. Stone (Kansas State) and Diane Labrosse (H-Diplo managing editor).

There will be ample space in future columns to consider the problems and prospects of international history in detail. For the time being, it seems appropriate to discuss the overall mission of this feature.

Why a “Spotlight”?

We all complain – only half in jest – about the massive scholarly output in just about any field of history. Collectively, historians of international affairs know a tremendous amount about the wider world, but how do we *know* what we know? It’s a problem familiar from the study of large bureaucracies (like those in the intelligence community!), but it applies just as readily to the balkanized world of historical research.

Our professional journals have developed techniques for sorting and evaluating the flow of publications – mainly in the form of book reviews and review essays. But these classic genres focus on full-length monographs, devoting little attention to the great mass of journal articles appearing each quarter. H-Diplo does run [article reviews](#), but it can only devote individual space to a small number of articles appearing in prominent journals such as [Diplomatic History](#) or the [Journal of Cold War Studies](#). IHS will complement this approach by engaging in a kind of “data mining,” casting a wide net in examining how various issues are being addressed in recent article writing.

It’s important to be realistic about the limitations of a “spotlight” approach. These columns will be too brief to offer an in-depth critique of individual works. The goal here is rather to sketch out broad developments and also to put forward reflections, both

practical and methodological, about how international history might further develop. Contributors will also cast a comparative glance at how the field is unfolding outside the English-speaking world.

Why “International”?

The term “international history” may sound innocuous enough, but readers will still be wondering why it was chosen in place of “diplomatic” or “transnational” history.

The editors of the Spotlight feel that “international history” is the broadest available category for characterizing interactions outside the boundaries of a given nation-state. “Diplomatic history” carries the connotation of state-oriented activity, though of course practitioners of diplomatic history (and the journal that bears this name) have long since broadened their inquiries beyond the capital cities of a handful of great powers.

“Transnational” has emerged in recent years as a hugely popular designation – one that is often targeted, directly or implicitly, against the diplomatic historians. In its own right, the “transnational” perspective offers a substantial enrichment of history writing within various national historiographies. Many historians who embrace “transnational” horizons had not previously paid much heed to developments beyond national borders, so the new trend has significantly increased scholarly attention to foreign affairs. However, more often than not the narrative framework remains oriented around a single state. “Transnational” German historians are still writing the history of Germany; they are simply doing so in a wider context, with reference to colonies, trade, cultural exchange, immigration, and other forces.

The editors do not wish to discount the merits of transnational history; much of their own work falls into this category. At any rate, the term is gaining currency beyond academia as well, with reporters on [National Public Radio](#) speaking of “transnational” gang activity where they might once have said, less suggestively, “cross-border.” Rather than dismissing the term as trendy, historians would do better to embrace the concept and work to refine its meaning.

There is, nevertheless, a significant level of analysis that transnational thinking does not readily encompass. International history is concerned with the *interaction* among various groups, states, or individuals. The central premise – though it is seldom stated – is that the problems under consideration cannot be understood without reference to decisions, events, and mentalities unfolding in multiple locations. These interactions yield a dynamic that transcends not only national boundaries, but national *narratives*.

Whether and how international history can have its “own” narratives is a difficult question, one that will no doubt come up repeatedly in the IHS. Much of the content of this column will be a product of the dialogue it generates on H-Diplo. For the time being, anticipated columns in the months to come include:

H-Diplo IHS: Introducing the International History Spotlight (IHS)

- The League of Nations and international civil society
- Languages and archives – the multi-archival conundrum
- New studies on oil diplomacy
- Human rights: a “whiggish” research agenda?
- European empires and the Cold War
- Wendt for historians: “Constructivism” in international history

Call for Authors

The editors have a long “wish list” but readers of H-Diplo will no doubt have their own proposals for contributions to the Spotlight. Please contact Will Gray at wggray@purdue.edu with your ideas and feedback. We do expect contributors to read broadly in the journal literature and if possible to consult materials in more than one language.

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