

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



Reviewed Works:

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For a historian to write about how students should approach historical research is undoubtedly a brave venture. Many would instinctively shy away from such a task, for the one thing that can be guaranteed in engaging in this kind of project is that your peers will have strong views that do not necessarily accord with your own and that criticism will duly flow. It is therefore extremely heartening that an historian as eminent as Marc Trachtenberg has decided to bite the bullet and provide students with a wide-ranging methodological guide to approaching international history, for a well-crafted and thoughtful book like this is desperately needed. This book is destined to be of great utility to teachers and students alike, both as a guide and a starting point for debate, and it is to be greatly welcomed.

Any guide to methodology will, of course, be influenced by the author's own attitude towards their discipline and by the actual research that they have carried out. In Trachtenberg's case we have an historian whose present post is Professor

of Political Science at UCLA and who has specialized in the history of American-European political interaction in the twentieth century, but who has also shown an interest in strategic studies. The upshot is that this book is written from the perspective of someone versed in what might be termed 'traditional' international history, but who displays a distinct sympathy towards the work carried out in International Relations (IR). Indeed, Trachtenberg describes the book as being partly intended to introduce political science students to historical research. In addition, it is clear that in regard to IR, he leans towards the realist perspective. For example, he declares unequivocally that 'the key point ... is that international politics is about conflict' (141) and virtually all of his examples duly allude to crises and strategy.

This will, of course, be like a red rag to a bull for those international historians who believe that the discipline is about more than the study of war origins and consequences. Moreover, it may only provoke a disapproving sigh from those critics within the historical profession who believe international history to be irretrievably conservative. The real issue though is whether this traditional perspective in any way short-changes students in

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terms of how they ought to approach topics or handle the key research sources. On the whole, this is not the case. In many of the areas that Trachtenberg covers, such as conceptualizing and writing about one's project or using library and archive finding aids, his guidance is wise and it is easy to adapt his detailed advice to meet one's own needs. He often states the obvious, but teachers of history will be aware from their experience of supervising student dissertations that this is often exactly the kind of advice that is needed.

One area, however, where his guidance might cause concern relates to his understanding of politics and his advice on open sources, such as newspapers and the records of legislative assembly debates. Following his realist inclinations, Trachtenberg's primary interest is in the activities and thoughts of the state's 'key people' (143), in other words politicians, diplomats and senior military personnel. These figures, he argues, exist in a rarefied world where they are exposed to 'the realities of international politics' (153). As such, it is in official documents, and perhaps in private papers, that one gets to understand how they think and how policy is made. Open sources, he contends, are less useful, for what one finds in this material is largely politicians engaging in rhetoric designed to win over public opinion.

This is good advice up to a point and it probably reflects the consensus among international historians as a whole, but it does underplay the contribution that open sources can make to a project. To put any crisis in context, to learn what would be politically acceptable, risky or even suicidal, it is surely necessary to know something about public opinion, whether elite or popular, and this can best be gathered from open sources. For example, one of the most revealing books on British appeasement of Germany is Nicholas Crowson's *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators, 1935-1940* (London: Routledge, 1997), which outlines the degree to which Tory opinion restricted the foreign-policy choices open to the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments. In addition, political speeches should not be dismissed as merely airy rhetoric, for they can illuminate both individual and societal beliefs and values. Philip Williamson in his *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) uses Baldwin's speeches to explain his reaction to the revival of German power in the 1930s and in doing so sheds light more broadly on British society as a whole. Open sources can therefore be very useful, and it is a matter of regret that many international historians seem to be reluctant to engage in such research.

Aside from his approach to the political process, the other major problem with the book is the way in which Trachtenberg in chapter four presents a case study of American entry into the Second World War in 1941. This exercise is designed to demonstrate how one can approach familiar, well-covered topics, but a number of difficulties arise, both with his methodology and his analysis when he looks at events in the Pacific. In regard to his methodology, it is a shame that Trachtenberg does not refer back to the important advice he offers in chapter three about how historiographical essays can be used as a way of directing reading. It would, for example, have been useful in chapter four if he had engaged with Michael Barnhart's excellent historiographical review of the origins of the Pacific War

and indicated how this essay helps one to identify and assess the key works in this field.¹ As it is, it is not clear why Trachtenberg privileges some books over others. There is, for example, no mention of Robert Butow's *The John Doe Associates: Backdoor Diplomacy for Peace, 1941* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974) or of the essays in Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (eds), *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990). In addition, it seems odd that he brings primary sources into this case study, for it precedes the chapter on working with documents. Would it not have been better to have placed the case study at the end of the book so that students could see how all the threads of research can be drawn together?

In terms of his analysis the first thing to note is that Trachtenberg, in choosing to look at American entry into the Second World War, has not picked a simple example. One difficulty is that the Roosevelt administration's policy-making process was notoriously opaque, which means that it is far from easy to discern the president's thoughts and motivations. It is this, as much as anything else, which has allowed conspiracy theorists to have a field day with this topic. In addition, another problem is that any attempt at analysis has to take place in the shadow of one of the last century's most famous events, the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. The sheer drama of this assault means that when studying this period it is hard to break free from one of the great difficulties posed by any analysis of war origins, namely how to avoid a deterministic approach that treats the conflict as inevitable and the eventual combatants as fully cognizant of the consequences of their actions.

Determinism's allure is represented in Trachtenberg's study by his attraction to the 'back door to war' thesis, which seeks to explain American policy towards Japan by suggesting that Roosevelt saw events in the Pacific as a roundabout means of involving the United States in a conflict with Germany. According to this idea, Roosevelt followed a tough policy towards Japan in the hope and, indeed, the expectation that this would precipitate a general war against the Tripartite Powers. On weighing the evidence, Trachtenberg implies that this is a more convincing explanation than the idea that American policy in the Pacific was designed to contain and deter Japan, which is the argument most often advanced by detailed studies of this topic.

One of Trachtenberg's objections to the containment thesis relates to the inflexible nature of the American oil embargo, 'which he [Roosevelt] knew would in all probability lead to war with Japan' (100). To Trachtenberg this inflexibility can be interpreted as angling for war. However, the argument that this was Roosevelt's intention is open to doubt. Waldo Heinrichs, in the most authoritative account of American policy in 1941, argues that Roosevelt's oil embargo was designed to achieve 'the immobilization of Japan' and makes it clear that this ran in parallel with a determined effort to strengthen U.S. forces in the

¹ Michael Barnhart, 'The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific: Synthesis Impossible?' in Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 268-295.

Philippines.² In other words, Roosevelt favoured tightening the screws on Japan not because he wished to precipitate hostilities but because he believed that the Japanese could be deterred. This was, of course, a grave error of judgement, but it points to one of the main problems in 1941: the United States, due to its underestimation of Japan's military capabilities, followed a deterrence policy without actually having a sufficiently effective deterrent in place.

Washington's policy, of course, contained within it the risk of war, but even then one has to ask whether policy-makers in Washington believed that the failure of containment would necessarily lead to a direct and immediate American-Japanese conflict or whether the road to hostilities would be more circuitous. In other words, was there a clear-cut 'back door to war'? The evidence cited by Heinrichs suggests that there was a great deal of uncertainty about Japan's future policy even up until the outbreak of hostilities with many believing that its next move would be against Thailand. It was only on 5 December that it became clear that Malaya was in its sights and no firm evidence existed prior to the outbreak of war that there would be a direct assault on American territory.³ This confusion hardly suggests that Roosevelt was a puppet master controlling the situation, for there was no guarantee that Congress would declare war on Japan if the latter attacked Thailand or even perhaps the British or Dutch colonial territories. In the end Roosevelt was let off the hook and did not have to rally Congress into declaring war over an indirect threat to American security, but this could not have been predicted.⁴

Trachtenberg also suggests that Washington's tough stance towards the Hull-Nomura talks is an indication of ulterior motives. He observes that if the United States only wanted to contain Japan then it need not have pursued a hard line over China in these talks, which was tantamount to pushing for a Japanese retreat. In making this argument, however, he fails to address two key issues that exercised policy-makers in 1941. The first is that he overlooks the fear that to take anything less than a tough line on China might have a catastrophic effect on Chinese morale leading to a collapse that would have freed the Japanese army to strike against British, Dutch and Russian territory.⁵ The second problem is that the administration needed to avoid any perceived selling out of Chinese interests for

² Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 179.

³ Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, 215-216. Unfortunately on one of the few occasions when Trachtenberg does mention intelligence, he resurrects the unsubstantiated claim made by James Rusbridger that the British government has refused to release Churchill's supposed 'second telegram' to Roosevelt of 26 November 1941. There is no evidence that any such telegram ever existed.

⁴ Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 307; David Kaiser, 'Conspiracy or Cock-up? Pearl Harbor Revisited', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, 357-358.

⁵ Jonathan Uitley, *Going to War with Japan 1937-1941* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005 edn) 159, 165, 175.

this might raise the prospect of it being accused of appeasement, which was by then probably the dirtiest word in the English language.⁶ In other words, Trachtenberg assumes that the Roosevelt administration had room to manoeuvre in regard to the China issue, when in fact military and political reasons dictated otherwise. Nor does Trachtenberg take on board the role of human frailties, such as the damage done by Hull's fatalism and lack of strategic wisdom or Nomura's naïve and misleading diplomacy.

Trachtenberg's treatment of Japan suffers from similar failings, for by drawing on the work of Tsunoda Jun to argue that the Japanese were willing to compromise to avoid war, he overlooks the evidence which suggests that Tokyo's thinking was considerably less flexible. It is worth noting here that in a footnote he observes that that it is 'unusual' that the 'translator' of Tsunoda's work, David Titus, wrote a critical introduction when it was published in English (107). In fact, the criticisms that Titus, who is an historian in his own right, made are well-founded and deserving of Trachtenberg's attention, for they explain the subjective approach that Tsunoda took towards this topic and the flaws in his analysis.⁷ In addition, Trachtenberg cites the American and British ambassadors in Tokyo, Joseph Grew and Sir Robert Craigie, to support his argument that Japan was prepared to negotiate, but does not acknowledge that their advice was disregarded because they had been wrong about Japanese moderation so many times before.

The situation in 1941 was thus more complex than Trachtenberg imagines. The Roosevelt administration was buffeted by a variety of factors over which it had little control and its decision-making was, due to its misperception of Japanese capabilities, adversely affected by its inability to understand how Japan was likely to react. Japan meanwhile may have been torn between war and peace, but the 'hawks' were in the ascendancy and, moreover, the short-term military balance favoured a Japanese attack. Thus, while the 'back door to war' interpretation might offer an attractive conceptualization of American policy and fits in with a realist approach that sees all actions as rational and calculated, it can only work as an explanation if one downplays the role of personality, miscalculation, and the influence of domestic politics. In the end, Trachtenberg's analysis provides an over-simplified, deterministic picture of a very complex historical event. In this lies a lesson that should be part of his overall guidance to students, which is to deal with the temptation and dangers of revisionism. When one finds oneself differing with the general consensus about an historical event it is wise to pause and to reflect on why one's own conclusion is out of line with that of most other historians.

⁶ See Richard J. Grace, 'Whitehall and the Ghost of Appeasement: November 1941', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1979, 173-191.

⁷ David Titus, 'Introduction', in James W. Morley (ed.), *The Final Confrontation: Japan's Negotiations with the United States, 1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xix-xxxviii. For a recent well-balanced account of Japan's road to war, see Noriko Kawamura, 'Emperor Hirohito and Japan's Decision to Go to War with the United States: Reexamined', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, 51-79.