

Review Essay



A Renewal of Diplomatic History or the Continuation of Old Trends?

Selected Readings from the French-speaking Field of International History

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The era of French scientific insularity is largely gone by, and most French historical research happens nowadays under the influence of and in dialogue with international trends. The recent renewal of interest in the history of diplomatic practices, the cultural history of diplomacy, diplomatic and semi-diplomatic personnel, cultural and economic diplomacy must however be reinstated in a specific context of French international history.¹ The goal of this review essay is, through a series of readings, to highlight areas of recent French-speaking research on the history of diplomacy and diplomats. The list is far from exhaustive; it is also inevitably biased, highlighting the interests of its author. Written from an outsider's perspective, it could easily be completed by scholars situated closer to the subject. It will however, one hopes, bring into view some of the trends visible in recent French-speaking literature.

1 Cf. Frank, R., ed., *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012). This vast methodological reflection also functions as a *who's who* of the French (and more specifically the Parisian) field of international history in the late 2000s. Pages 475–510, Jean-Claude Allain and Laurence Badel deal with “*L'appareil diplomatique*.” A shorter overview of developments in French international history since 1990 can be found in: Jeannesson, S. “Diplomatie et politique étrangère de la France contemporaine: un bilan historiographique depuis 1990.” *Histoire, économie et société* 2 (2012), 87–98.

1 From Diplomatic Biographies to the Cultural History of Diplomats

Christian Lequesne's book *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay* seems like an odd place to start.² A political scientist, Lequesne draws heavily from Iver B. Neumann in writing a participatory study on the French diplomatic corps. The book mostly deals with social reproduction and social homogeneity, the education of diplomats, practices and professional identities, and the changes wrought in the past 30 years by a combination of massive budget cuts, new administrative norms, new forms of communication, and changes in the international system. But he also brings into view a strong interest in the prosopographical and biographical studies of diplomats, recently renewed through studies aiming at a methodologically more modern and perhaps at times more critical take on diplomatic personalities and the French diplomatic corps.

Renaud Meltz's biography of Alexis Léger, Raphaële Ulrich-Pier's biography of René Massigli or Stanislas Jeannesson's biography of Jacques Seydoux give us three excellent biographies of key French diplomatic figures, reflecting on the life of their subject, their social backgrounds and professional practices, their role in decision-making, and the structures in which they were working.³ These three figures also highlight different levels of French diplomacy, from the Paris-based economic expert Seydoux to the high-flying ministerial administrators and ambassadors Léger and Massigli. Isabelle Dasque's 2005 doctoral thesis, unfortunately never published in book form, is another example of a modern prosopographical study of French diplomats.⁴ It deals with diplomats during the early decades of the Fourth Republic as a social, professional and political group, emphasizing especially the emergence in their ranks of the Republican bourgeoisie. One last example of this kind of research is a volume of contributions dealing with "writer-diplomats" during the 3rd and 4th Republics as a cultural and sociological group overlapping the literary and administrative fields.⁵

2 Lequesne, C. *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay. Les pratiques des diplomates français* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2017).

3 Meltz, R. *Alexis Léger dit Saint-John Perse* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008); Ulrich-Pier, R. *René Massigli (1888–1988). Une vie de diplomate*, 2. vol (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006); Jeannesson, S. *Jacques Seydoux diplomate, 1870–1929* (Paris: Presses de Sorbonne Université, 2013).

4 Dasque, I. *À la recherche de Monsieur de Norpois: les diplomates de la République (1871–1914)*, thèse de doctorat en histoire (Université de Paris-Sorbonne-Paris iv, 2005). Dasque summarizes her argument in Dasque, I. "Une élite en mutation: les diplomates de la République (1871–1914)." *Histoire, économie & société* 4 (2007), 81–98.

5 Badel, L., and G. Ferragu, S. Jeannesson, R. Meltz, eds. *Ecrivains et diplomates. L'invention d'une tradition. xixe–xxie siècles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

These publications originated from increasing communication between the methods and preoccupations of cultural studies and international history. This is best summarized in a 2014 programmatic text written by Isabelle Dasque and Renaud Meltz, where they described an array of studies applying the tools and concerns of cultural history to diplomacy and diplomats.⁶ Most of these studies remain focused on official diplomats and diplomacy, well in line with a French school of international history mostly concentrated on the state and its decision-making processes. More heterodox figures (non-official diplomats, multilateral agents...) are less studied, with a few notable exceptions such as Jean Monnet – a multilateral figure but also a French representative.⁷ One finds also some research for instance on women in diplomacy⁸ or, with Marc Loriol, on the links between the intimate and the professional in the practices of diplomatic couples.⁹

2 Negotiations, Conferences and Embassies

This cultural approach has also diffused into the history of negotiations, conference diplomacy, and visions of diplomacy as intercultural dialogue. The latter is well exemplified by Christian Windler, who studied French consular officers in Morocco and their activities as forms of cultural exchanges with figures of the “other” mixing projection and prejudices, mingling and distancing.¹⁰ Michel Espagne and others have also described diplomatic contacts as forms of “cultural transfers” linked to the circulations of norms, information, and models.¹¹

6 Dasque I., R. Meltz. “Pour une histoire culturelle de la diplomatie. Pratiques et normes diplomatiques au xix^e siècle.” *Histoire, économie & société* 2 (2014), 3–16. Cf. Gienow-Hecht, J. “On the Division of Knowledge and the Community of Thought.” In *Culture and International History*, eds. J. Gienow-Hecht and F. Schumacher (Berghahn Books, 2004), 3–25.

7 Eg. Duchêne, F. *Jean Monnet: The First Statesman of Interdependence* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1994).

8 Dénéchère, Y., ed. *Femmes et diplomatie. France xxe siècle* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2004).

9 Loriol, M. “Le travail diplomatique et l’intime.” *Socio. La nouvelle revue des sciences sociales*, 7 (2016), 45–64.

10 Windler, C. *La diplomatie comme expérience de l’autre. Consuls français au Maghreb, 1700–1840* (Paris: Droz, 2002).

11 See Espagne, M. *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: PUF, 1999); Belissa, M., and E. Schnakenbourg. “Les circulations diplomatiques en Europe au xviii^e siècle: représentation, information, diffusion des modèles culturels”. In *Les circulations internationales en Europe: années 1680–années 1780*, eds. Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire and Pierreck Pourchasse (Paris: PUPS, 2011), 279–295.

Negotiations and conferences have also been studied as moments of intercultural contacts.¹²

Linked to this interest for the cultural history of diplomats and diplomacy, Marion Aballéa's doctoral thesis on the French embassy in Berlin moves the focus from people to places.¹³ The book builds on extensive empirical research to recreate the long-term history of an institution, a building, and networks. The book's thematic structure brings the eye of the reader, not so much to a limited series of dramatic events, but more to long-term patterns and evolutions, daily routines, the importance of places, practices, and people. From the ambassadors to the cooks, from the building to the secret correspondence, from great crises to consular work, Aballéa looks at a "diplomatic site" in its manifold dimensions, bringing forward the importance of places and geography in the diplomatic process.¹⁴

3 Administrative Histories of the Foreign Service

Administrative histories and presentations of the French "diplomatic machine" are another vantage point into recent French contributions to the history of diplomacy. Maurice Vaisse's recent edited volume¹⁵ inevitably brings to mind the massive *Les affaires étrangères et le corps diplomatique français*, an administrative history spanning more than 2000 pages and coordinated by Alain Baillou in the 1980s.¹⁶ Although Vaisse's volume is leaner, it has the same encyclopaedic ambitions and density (a feature compounded by clumsy editing). It also has the same strong links with the Ministry, whose employees are often allowed to tell their own stories. Nonetheless, the book remains one of the most up-to-date and complete surveys of the French Foreign Service. Behind its unassuming title, Marie-Christine Kessler's book *Les ambassadeurs* gives one a less exhaustive but more reader-friendly overview of the field, with

12 See for instance Andretta, S., S. Pequignot, M.-K. Schaub, J.-C. Waquet and C. Windler, eds. *Paroles de négociateurs. L'entretien dans la pratique diplomatique de la fin du Moyen Âge à la fin du XIXe siècle* (École française de Rome, 2010).

13 Aballéa, M. *Un exercice de diplomatie chez l'ennemi. L'ambassade de France à Berlin, 1871–1933* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2017).

14 In Germany, this "geographic turn" can be observed e.g. in Hort, J. *Architektur Der Diplomatie: Representation in Europäischen Botschaftsbauten, 1800–1920. Konstantinopel – Rom – Wien – St. Petersburg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

15 Vaisse, M., ed. *Diplomatie française. Outils et acteurs depuis 1980* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2018).

16 Baillou, A., ed. *Les affaires étrangères et le corps diplomatique français*, 2 volumes (Paris: CNRS, 1984).

both historical and analytical depth. Kessler reinserts French diplomats between the upper classes of society, the “*méritocratie à la française*” bred in the specific environment of French elite university schools, and the peculiarities of the French civil service.¹⁷ She also tries to find the contours of a possible “French diplomatic style,” while reminding the reader of the fundamentally transnational nature of diplomatic norms (117–120), especially in the current globalized world and in the context of multilateral organisations.

Other interesting examples are to be found in studies of the French consular system¹⁸ and of the French colonial administration, with Christian Windler’s above-mentioned book as an obvious link between the two.¹⁹ Finally, one can observe a renewed interest in the study of para-diplomatic agents, networks, experts and back-channels. Recently, the 2018 book *Experts et expertises en diplomatie*²⁰ has gathered a number of contributions on this subject, including studies of the diplomatic roles of military envoys and spies.²¹ Networks and semi-diplomatic mediators have also been the objects of some publications, especially in a series of geographical case studies under the coordination of Antoine Marès.²² The bulk of French international history, however, seems to rarely move very far from the state.

4 Adjectivized Diplomacy, from Economic to Cultural

A third trend worth highlighting here is the interest of French researchers in adjectivized forms of diplomacy: trade, economic, cultural, public, etc. This is perhaps best approached through the work of Laurence Badel on French

17 Kessler, M.-C. *Les ambassadeurs* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2012).

18 Ulbert, J., and G. Le Bouëdec, eds. *La fonction consulaire à l’époque moderne. L’affirmation d’une institution économique et politique (1500–1700)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

19 Eg. El Mechat, S., ed. *Les administrations coloniales xixe–xxe siècles, Esquisse d’une histoire comparée* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

20 Jeannesson, S., F. Jesné and E. Schnakenbourg, eds. *Experts et expertises en diplomatie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018).

21 Dessberg, F., A. Marès and I. Davion, eds. *Militaires et diplomates français face à l’Europe centrale* (Paris: Eur’Orbem éditions, 2017); Fourcade, O. “Objets, approches et problématiques d’une histoire française du renseignement: un champ historiographique en construction.” *Histoire, économie & société* 2(2012), 99–110.

22 Marès, A., ed. *la France et l’Europe centrale: médiateurs et médiations* (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 2015). A second volume of studies with the same title was published in 2016.

economic diplomacy and official trade promotion.²³ French scholarship is not short of economic historians; Badel was, however, one of the first to look at the role of the French state in trade promotion and support for French companies abroad. She describes the way the French administration supported national companies abroad, the way this support evolved, and the long-term turf wars between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Another sub-category of diplomatic action dealt with in a series of books in the early 2000s is that of cultural international relations and cultural diplomacy.²⁴ Some of these books, especially on cultural diplomacy, have been published in French but originate from outside France: a special issue of the journal *Relations internationales* dedicated to models of cultural diplomacy, for example, was coordinated by Matthieu Gillibert, from the Swizz university of Fribourg.²⁵ Both of these fields – the interest for economic diplomacy and the interest for cultural and public diplomacy – are informed by the ambition of French historiography towards an all-encompassing history, *une histoire totale*. French international history has been keen to consider other aspects of international relations than politics and has thus been open to cultural and economic history.²⁶

5 Other Times, Other Places

A notable specificity of this recent interest in diplomats and diplomacy as part of a history of international relations is its rather even chronological spread, from the Cold War back to the French 17th and 18th centuries. The dominant figure in the study of French diplomacy during the modern era is undoubtedly

23 Badel, L. *Diplomatie et grands contrats. L'État français et les marchés extérieurs au xxe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010).

24 Rolland, R., ed. *Histoire culturelle des relations internationales* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); A. Dubosclard et al, eds. *Entre rayonnement et réciprocité. Contributions à l'histoire de la diplomatie culturelle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002), and more recently for instance Guénard-Maget, A. *Une diplomatie culturelle dans les tensions internationales. La France en Europe centrale et orientale, 1936–1940 / 1944–1951* ((Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014).

25 *Relations Internationales*, special issue “L'Etat et les diplomaties culturelles” (2017); Milani, P. *Le diplomate et l'artiste. Construction d'une politique culturelle suisse à l'étranger (1938–1985)* (Neuchatel: Editions Alphil, 2013).

26 René Girault reminds his reader in 1986 that “*L'histoire des relations internationales sera totalisante ou ne sera pas.*” (Girault, R. *Enjeux et puissance. Pour une histoire des relations internationales au xxe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1986), 33).

Lucien Bély,²⁷ who was described in a review of his 1990 book on 17th century French diplomats as one of the rejuvenators of a “diplomatic history” inspired by cultural and intellectual history.²⁸ Generally, France’s historians of the modern era have been trailblazers in a modernized interest for diplomacy and diplomatic practices, based on their analyses of the intricacies of France’s diplomatic relations between the 30 years war and the French Revolution. France’s contribution to the edification of contemporary diplomatic norms during the modern era makes it a particularly interesting case for historians of diplomacy and diplomats.²⁹

If the vast majority of this production remains concentrated on the French case, there is also a fair amount of research dedicated to other states, mostly situated in France’s immediate vicinity. Obviously, a major part of this interest focuses on Germany, with a notable part dealing with European integration, but one could also emphasize the vivacity of French scholarship on Russian and Soviet diplomacy. Sabine Dullin’s work on Stalin’s interwar diplomats³⁰ gives one a perfect example of such studies. In her book, Dullin not only looks at the political activities of the likes of Maxim Litvinov but also considers their social background, their integration in the norms of the transnational diplomatic corps, and the role of their representations of the world.

6 New Wine in Old Bottles?

Despite its programmatic interest in the deep trends and underlying structures of foreign policy and international relations, which might draw it away from diplomats, the French international history school has also traditionally emphasized the broad study of administrators, politicians, agents, their backgrounds and roles in decision-making processes.³¹ One could even say that the

27 Bély, L. *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

28 Hourcade, P. “Compte-rendu de lecture: Lucien Bély, *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV*.” *Cahiers Saint-Simon* 20(1992), 85–87.

29 E.g. Schnakenbourg, E. *La France, le Nord et l’Europe au début du xviii^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008). Bély draws a portrait of this historiography dealing with “the invention of diplomacy”: Bély, L. “L’invention de la diplomatie.” In Frank, ed., 107–137.

30 Dullin, S. *Des hommes d’influences. Les ambassadeurs de Staline en Europe, 1930–1939* (Paris: Payot, 2001).

31 One can find good examples of that in the *Revue d’histoire diplomatique*, one of the oldest journals dedicated to the study of diplomatic history. Created in 1887 under the patronage of the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, it was for long a very classical publication meant to research the diplomats of the past for the education of the current ones. The

specificities of this French school of *histoire des relations internationales* (its early interest for a broad array of underlying factors, its relations with social sciences, its understanding of the links between the international and the domestic, its interest for the role of administration and politics, its focus on a variety of agents of foreign policy and international relations) make it somewhat easier for French researchers to understand the concerns of a renewed diplomatic history. One could take as an example of such precociousness a double issue of the academic journal *Relations internationales* dedicated to “new forms of diplomacy in the 20th century” already in 1982 (issues 31 and 32).

References to Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle in French scholarship today can be seen as partially strategic, the reflex of scholars eager to embed their research in the dominant references, traditions and genealogies of a tightly knit national scientific field. However, that French school of international history has also proved flexible enough to retain coherence while accommodating within its broad confines paradigmatic shifts, new subjects of scholarly investigations, and far-ranging cooperation with the social sciences. A renewed interest in the history of diplomacy and diplomats, not only as cogs in the machine but as historical agents endowed with cultural, social and intellectual traits, has thus found its place in this tradition. This is best exemplified by the past three years’ annual special issues that *Relations internationales* has dedicated to “recent research.”³² These articles showcase the vitality and prominence of approaches representative of a new diplomatic history: biographical studies of diplomatic agents, studies in cultural diplomacy, the activities of semi-diplomatic agents (from trade unionists to soldiers), cultural studies of negotiations, legal and economic experts, non-state actors, human rights and international law, etc. Those researchers find their footing between a strong French historiographical tradition and the transnational evolutions of cultural and international history.

journal has recently expanded towards a wider brief studying diplomacy in international relations and the contemporary period.

32 *Relations internationales*, special issues “Nouvelles recherches,” 2017/2; 2018/2; 2019/2.