The Last Word: COVID and Diplomatic History—Taking a Long[er] View

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The covid-19 pandemic attracted a fair amount of attention from historians, with special issues and roundtables and conference panels comparing it to past pandemics and reflecting on its likely status as a significant historical event. These reflections began even in the pandemic’s first year. Diplomatic History was one of those journals to devote an issue to the musings of foreign relations historians about the ways the pandemic was shaping our thinking about the profession and our subfield. Christopher Nichols, another foreign relations historian, organized two fascinating issues of the Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, comparing covid-19 to the 1918-1919 flu, as well as reflecting on the broader significance of the pandemic in U.S. and even world history. In some ways this attention is no surprise. Covid-19 has killed millions around the world, disrupted every aspect of people’s lives from work to school to travel, shaped the global economy, and been the center of disputes about the functioning and role of public health policy. Of course, we should reflect on this global event. But in other ways it is curious that this pandemic prompted historians, who usually wait to let someone else write the “first draft of history,” to engage in immediate commentary. As editors of Diplomatic History, we commissioned a special issue early in the pandemic in part because we thought that these reflections might be useful not only to current scholars trying to make sense of what we are experiencing, but also to future scholars of this time. These reflections will become part of the vast covid-19 historical archive.

Our reflection on the effects of covid-19 continues, with perhaps more weariness due to its continued presence, as well as more caution, as we acknowledge that what we observe may be due to covid-19. But the myriad other changes of recent years all play their part as well. As editors, we reflect constantly about how changes in our profession and especially our subfield may be influencing who writes for us, who reviews for us, whose books we publish, and peer review. A more sophisticated analysis of submissions to our numbers above suggest, no statistically significant changes in submission rates, including by gender, or in the operation of peer review. We do not ask authors to reveal their gender when they submit, so our figures represent our best assessments based on publicly available information. We actually experienced a small but noticeable upswing in submissions by women. During June 2020-June 2021, women accounted for approximately 26% of original article submissions, and that percentage rose to approximately 31% during June 2021-June 2022. These percentages are a slight increase from the previous years, which saw approximately 20% of submissions from women. These figures do not include submissions for the special pandemic issue; we invited men and women equally for that feature. There were nearly no submissions from women in the spring and early summer of 2020, but it is impossible to say with certainty whether that decrease was a statistical anomaly or due to covid-19. The easily counted statistics show very little change during the covid years.

Despite these apparently stable numbers, journal and book editors in history have been talking among themselves about the perceived increased difficulty of recruiting reviewers for both manuscripts and books. They also observed that reviewers are taking longer to finish reviews, with more reviewers simply abandoning their tasks. The few studies to have explored the veracity of these claims have been in the sciences and social sciences rather than humanities. Two recent studies on article submissions in journals related to food policy and ecology found, as our numbers above suggest, no statistically significant changes in submission rates, including by gender, or in the operation of peer review. A more sophisticated analysis of submissions to and peer review invitations by all journals published by Elsevier in late 2021 paints a more complicated picture. In the sciences, especially medicine and health sciences, submissions to journals increased substantially in 2020. Women’s submissions lagged behind men’s, especially in the first months of 2020, with younger women lagging even more than women as a whole. The likelihood of a peer review invitation being accepted also went down, with men being slightly more likely to decline an invitation than women. As the article noted, this result meant that...
as men submitted more manuscripts, they accepted fewer peer review invitations. Meanwhile women took on a proportionally greater percentage of service obligations by continuing to accept peer review invitations even while submitting fewer manuscripts. As with any large and pervasive event, we’ll be studying and dealing with the effects and after-effects of the covid-19 pandemic for years, discovering that some careers and scholarship flourished, while others experienced severe hardship.

Our experiences at Diplomatic History provide only a small subset of the data needed to complete that broader picture. These experiences may be useful, however, both to SHAHR members as we think about how to move forward, and to the broader profession as historians seek to understand this global event. To start with observations most closely related to submissions and review: Diplomatic History continues to receive a substantial number of original manuscript submissions, of which many are high quality. When we ask people to review these article manuscripts, they usually say yes, and they usually return those reviews in a timely fashion. We ask that reviewers complete their task in 30 days. In 2019, 14.4% of reviewers took 45 or more days; 9.6% took 60 or more days. In 2020, those rates dropped slightly to 10% taking 45 or more days and 6.7% taking 60 or more days, while in 2021 they were nearly flat at 11.3% taking 45 or more days and 7.5% taking 60 or more. Diplomatic History reviewers have been consistently timely and helpful, for which we are grateful.

It is difficult for us to come to any definite conclusions about the book review process, given the variety of types of books we review and the peculiarities of how our submission software program deals with book reviews. We invite people from across the spectrum of careers open to History PhDs to review books, but we do require that they already have published a monograph. We have not noticed long term systemic difficulties in recruiting reviewers, although fewer people did agree at the height of the pandemic than is usual. We responded by granting a longer time to all book reviewers, and that resulted in more people agreeing, and most of them finishing their reviews in a timely fashion. It is also the case that some people who have agreed to review a book do not end up turning in a review, although the percentage of reviewers who do this has remained relatively steady over the past few years. The broader problems with book reviews do not seem to stem from the pandemic, but rather from issues in the academy more generally.

One subtle slowdown has occurred among authors who were asked to revise and resubmit their manuscripts in response to reviewer comments. We ask that authors complete revisions within two months, and a high percentage of manuscripts do come back, revised, within that time span. Interestingly, it’s quite common for these manuscripts to be re-submitted between day 55 and 59. We all seem to be susceptible to deadlines. But we remain willing to work with authors who need more time, and that number did increase significantly in late 2020 and into 2021. In 2019, 6.6% of authors submitted between day 61 and day 90 after receiving their revise and resubmit decision, while an additional 16.6% submitted after day 91. Those numbers shifted in 2020, with 14.2% submitting during days 61-90, and 9.5% after day 91. In 2020, interestingly, late submissions increased as the year proceeded. In 2021, late submissions increased significantly, to 13.6% submitted between day 61 and 90, and 27.3% at day 91 or later. It seems to the editorial staff that if authors are asked to make minor or concrete revisions, they are able to do so in a way similar to past years. But editors and historians we are also mindful of the possible effect of archive closures and travel restrictions on our scholarship. These closures and disruptions have had the most devastat-
that raises the question of how these relationships can be forged and strengthened. SHAFR could play a role in bringing together such collaborations, through its annual conference, through specially designed workshops, and through shared work on its website.

SHAFR members have already begun a less intense method of collaboration, in the form of file sharing. James Stocker, one of the founding members of the group working on this project, provides this explanation. “The SHAFR Archival Sharing Group is a Google Group where members share or request images of archival documents. It was founded at the outset of the pandemic to help scholars to access archival documents that were at the time inaccessible. It is still available, and group moderator James Stocker welcomes new members. You can access the group here: https://groups.google.com/a/shafr.org/g/archival-docs. This approach offers significant promise, and we hope SHAFR members will continue to support it. It could be paired with more steps to help qualified researchers who are willing to serve as research assistants make connections with scholars who could use their services.

We might also encourage more article submissions on topics that rely less on national or political archives and more on published sources or sources that are readily available in digital form. That process is already underway, and such scholarship might become more prominent in Diplomatic History and other historical journals in the near future. Grappling with the limits and possibilities of digitally available sources provides us with an opportunity for engaging conversations about methodology in our field.

It is still too early to assess with any degree of accuracy the long-term effects of the pandemic on our scholarship, but we can probably all agree that the digitization of archival material has accelerated markedly. The digital will not replace the archival experience, but it will most likely take a bigger share of our source base in future scholarship. But whether it will also transform what kinds of historical questions we ask or what kinds of arguments we advance in the future is open for debate; a debate that SHAFR members might want to actively pursue.