

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 review, and how *Diplomatic History* is both shaping and shaped by the broader changes around us. We would like to reflect here on some of what we have observed during the "covid years." Many, maybe even most of these changes have broader causes, but covid may have thrown them into starker relief. We hope these observations will prompt a broader discussion about the ways we in this subfield want to respond to these developments.

In terms of reviewing and editing articles, *Diplomatic History* was not much affected by covid-19. Submissions in 2020 were noticeably down from 2019, with only 69 original manuscript submissions in 2020 as compared to 85 in 2019. But submissions then rebounded quickly in 2021, with 99 original manuscript submissions in that year. We are not getting submissions this year at quite the pace of 2021, but are on track to receive about as many as 2019. We have published full issues of articles and book reviews to date. There have been some delays on the production end, resulting in some issues arriving late in mailboxes. We published all issues on time throughout the pandemic, with our usual number of book reviews and articles. From the standpoint of a reader, then, *Diplomatic History* experienced modest effects from the

events of the last two and a half years.

From our standpoint as editors and assistant editors, our work of editing the journal was remarkably unchanged by the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, we already met virtually, since we are physically dispersed with staff in various locations. Over the last three years, we have had staff living in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, New York, and Japan. Our work takes place almost exclusively online, and we easily continued to send emails and proofs and reader reports, using Skype as we long have for our editorial meetings. The most significant change may have been that we all looked forward to those Skype calls a bit more than usual, since they allowed us to talk with people outside our immediate households during lockdowns.

Some informal observations and even some preliminary scholarship have suggested that women were most adversely affected by covid-19, professionally, since they often had to take on more care-giving duties and were less able to submit manuscripts for review during the pandemic. 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 somewhat, 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 SHAFR 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 if authors need to make more substantive changes, including additional research or rethinking parts of their argument or exposition, it takes longer than in the past. This situation makes planning future issues a bit more difficult since we cannot be certain how long it will take for articles to go through the review process and move toward publication. But the broader significance is that these delays suggest to us that many authors are under significant stress in their work and personal lives, whether as a result of the pandemic or other societal changes.

As 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-

ing consequences for our ability to do the work necessary to write articles and books. Our core research institutions, the U.S. National Archives and the Presidential Libraries, were completely closed for months. Even as we write this in late September 2022, many are recommending appointments and indicating low availability and slower access to materials than before the pandemic. Many of us conduct research in archives and libraries outside the United States, where similar access restrictions exist. People wanting to conduct research in China and Japan have not been able to do that at all, and access in other parts of the world has been uneven and unpredictable. Even when institutions have opened, the unpredictability of travel, of the possibility of getting covid while traveling, and the potential for places to suddenly close again have discouraged many of us from taking research trips we normally would have. The lack of access to archives did not show up immediately in submissions, naturally. People at the submission stage are usually relying on archival work they did months or years before. More recent submissions, though, are beginning to demonstrate how scholars have tried to compensate for the lack of access to physical archives in the midst of this global crisis. For most of us steady publication is a requirement. And as editors, we have to figure out how to maintain the rigorous standards of our published articles so that they will stand the test of time and not be disdained as "pandemic scholarship."

Foreign relations historians are clever, inventive, and tenacious. Not surprisingly, more scholars are relying on digitized sources, of which there are many. In a few areas, especially perhaps for scholarship on the recent past or pre-1800, digitized sources may be sufficient. Enough of the sources concerning topics in the recent past, were "born digital," or are only available in digital form, thus allowing researchers to produce scholarship regardless of covid. Digitization of archival sources is also well advanced in the field of early modern history to as late as 1800, helped perhaps by the fact that the total volume of available sources is smaller. For some topics, then, relying on digitized sources is not merely sufficient, but offers opportunities. Since most historians of U.S. foreign relations write about the more recent past, however, digitized sources are merely the tip of the iceberg of what is available and commonly used. However voluminous Foreign Relations of the United States became during the years after 1940, those volumes are still a mere introduction to the full range of U.S. sources a scholar is likely to need on any given topic. For historians, and for us as editors, the lack of access to archives and libraries poses an enormous dilemma. We all know archives are constructed and partial and conceal as much as they reveal. But our professional standards also require that we use the known archives fully in making claims about the past.

The standards are malleable, though, in ways that perhaps have not been sufficiently discussed. Covid may give us that chance, reminding us of the lacunae that have always been there, prompting us to acknowledge them more directly. At *Diplomatic History*, we are honored to receive submissions from scholars based in many parts of the world. Sometimes they have had access to archives as yet untapped by scholars based in the United States, Britain, or western part of Europe. But these scholars often have had no or only limited access to U.S. archives. On a case-by-case basis, we decide whether they have the right sources to make their case, using the advice of reviewers and our editorial judgement. The standard is always high, and when we reject one of these manuscripts due to inadequate access to sources from the United States, we often provide advice about how to shape the article to match the sources available. But as lack of access to sources remains a systemic problem, this task becomes more difficult if not impossible.

We have neither the funding nor the clout to offer solutions to some of these problems, but as we think and talk about these issues during our editorial meetings and work on the journal, we have had some ideas about possible ways to mitigate these lasting effects of covid. One of those is to encourage more collaborative submissions from authors based in different countries and separate continents. Archival research would become a shared task and the formulation of an argument a collaborative process. But

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): <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.