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Documentary Battles Propaganda, Censorship, and Editorial Professionalization

Sacha Zala

In 1983, discussing a volume of the series of the *Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland*, Forest L. Grier wrote apodictically in the *International Journal of International Law* that “there will always be scholarly concern over what might have been ‘left out’ of an edited collection of documents”.¹ The stigma of omission seems to be the “fall of men” for editors of diplomatic documents. E. Wilder Spaulding, from 1939 to 1946 the State Department official directly responsible for the production of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* stated in a memorandum of 1945 that:

“Our first objective in publishing the volumes [of FRUS] is to produce a ‘substantially’ complete and honest definitive record which should, so far as possible, be above criticism by experts *who are inevitably suspecting the Department of suppression of record*. To achieve a substantially complete record in the face of fears in some Departmental quarters that we are publishing too much too soon, forces us to compromise with those who desire almost immediate publication.”²

The relation between historical sciences and politics is a subtle process characterized by multiple levels of correlation. History gives legitimation, and as long as our discipline was not able to constitute and emancipate itself, the ruling class would not only construct history but also its sources. Almost paradoxically, the practice of veritable construction of convenient sources to legitimize a policy roots in the process of democratization. In 1624, the British government for the first time specifically used the publication of diplomatic correspondence to refute criticism of the opposition in both chambers of parliament. Thus, the practice of the so-called ‘colored books’ emerged.³

Colored Books

Colored books are official printed publications, limited collections of diplomatic documents mainly concerning certain aspects of foreign affairs and they are published ad-hoc. Usually during or after an international crisis, they are published by a government in order to inform the (parliamentary) public as well as to legitimize their own policy or to criticize the policy of another state. They owe their name to the colors of their covers which were used consistently by different governments: Great Britain blue; Germany white; France yellow; Italy green; Russia orange; Austro-Hungary red; Belgium grey and so forth. The colored books were edited by anonymous clerks in the name of the government of the foreign ministry. Colored books were designed to serve a clearly defined political function and were subject to short-term political motivations and constraints. Source-critically, delicate problems such as censorship (one-sided selection of documents due to requirements of own or other governments, suppression of undesired passages, etc.), deforming edition (paraphrasing telegrams in order to protect the secret encryption, distorted meaning by paraphrase, manipulation of chronology, subtle merging of documents, etc.), as well as forgery (made-up additions, etc.) emerge. Originating in the process of parliamentarization, the publication of colored books accounts for a political instrument of the second half of the 19th century, used both for domestic as well as foreign politics. The colored books reached their climax in the era of Imperialism. Afterwards, they declined steadily, interrupted only by a short renaissance during both world wars.⁴

The series of colored books marking the outbreak of World War One is started by the German white book, already presented to the Reichstag on August 4, 1914. Next to the omission of crucial documents and various falsifications, the white book also only contained a very limited and very small selection of documents. On August 6, 1914, the British blue book followed. The day after that, the Russian orange book was published, while the French suspiciously took their time for their 'edition' of the yellow book, published only on December 1st, 1914. In November, the blue book of the Serbian government was published and in mid-February of 1915, the Austro-Hungarian red book followed. Generally speaking, the publications of the entente powers generated a more convincing impact.

However, the global political developments during Word War I would quickly discredit these official publications from an unexpected side. Only two days after the beginning of

the October Revolution, Lenin addressed the second all-Russia Soviet congress and proclaimed in the edict on peace, that the government would “immediately start to publish all secret contracts”.⁵ Subsequently, the revolutionaries unveiled the czarist archives and, under the personal direction of Lenin and Trotsky⁶, they began to place a series of pertinent documental evidence in the press in order to discredit the capitalistic imperial diplomacy that had precipitated the world into the largest of all wars. Thus, an astonished global public learned of the existence of various secret hegemonic agreements of the great powers. Among these agreements were some of highly explosive political consequence, as for example the so-called secret agreement of London from April 26, 1915, where Great Britain and France warranted Russia future possession of Constantinople and the straits; the Sykes-Picot-Agreement of 1916, which covered the partition of the Asian part of the Ottoman Empire discreetly agreed upon by Great Britain and France, an agreement that stood in stark contrast to the British promises made to Jews and Arabs. These examples adequately illustrate the explosive potential of these revelations. Compliant with the bolshevist intentions to carry the revolutionary spark into the world, these reports in the Russian press were followed by translations in the most common languages. In April of 1918, Seymour Cocks published an English translation of important secret agreements of the great powers for the Union of Democratic Control in London.⁷ In 1919, a French compilation of Emile Laloy followed.⁸ From 1922 onwards, the soviet leaders gradually stopped the random practice of publication and proceeded to a phase concerned with a targeted strategy by editing monographic documental editions in book form that were printed and issued in France, Great Britain, Italy, the US and especially in Germany in the respective languages. One example of this propaganda campaign in situ can be seen in the collection of documents *L'intervento dell'Italia nei documenti segreti dell'Intesa*⁹ that very clearly pursued the objective to agitate the, ever since the peace treaty already nationalistically flared, tempers of Italy even further.¹⁰

Subsequently, the colored books concerned with the outbreak of World War I were thoroughly screened and critically and even polemically discussed in the 1920s by German historians over the course of the fiercely disputed debate of war-guilt. Already in 1915, Ludwig Bergsträsser discussed the issuing of the colored books concerned with the outbreak of the war in an essay published in the *Historische Zeitschrift*. He was able to show how the material of these “polemic pamphlets” was “very fragmentary and equally suspicious” and “that particular data had been tampered”.¹¹ Moritz Ritter held similar suspicions in 1920 again in the *Historische Zeitschrift*¹², and subsequently, this criticism grew to a large collection of eagerly attested weak points in adversarial publications.

Concerned with the question of responsibility for the war, this politically highly relevant occupation with contemporary history turned into some kind of holy duty of parts of the German generation of scholars.

The German research of the question of war-guilt was able to show how a quarter of the Russian orange book was tampered through various manipulations and a large number of documents were “shortened in a way that was unfavorable to Germany”. Forgery in the French yellow book was equally eagerly brought to light, for example in a telegram from July 31st 1914 that was tampered to an extent that the Russian mobilization could be depicted as an answer to Austrian measures and German preparations.

In 1926, the German *Zentralstelle für die Erforschung der Kriegsursachen* (Central Office for the Investigation of Causes of War) even published an own issue of the French yellow book, in which the “individual verifiable forgeries were made evident”. Likewise, the English blue book was criticized. Many of the therein printed documents were marked as “paraphrased and parts omitted”: of 169 documents, roughly 100 had been shortened or paraphrased.

In article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, allied and associated governments declared, and Germany accepted through signing the contract, that “Germany and its allies are responsible as initiator for all losses and damages that the allied and associated governments and their citizen had to endure due to the war that was forced upon them by the aggression of Germany and its allies.”¹³ This article was only included in the treaty after several drafts and displays the constraints inflicted on the allied statesmen by their campaign promises at the beginning of the war which were mainly concerned with Germany vouching for caused damages.¹⁴ Subsequently, the victorious parties had legally declared Germany’s obligation in the treaty in order to justify reparation claims.¹⁵ In Germany, however, the treaty was understood as a moral accusation that escalated to a veritable “trauma”¹⁶ throughout all social classes and parties. Within the German academic discourse, the endeavor to disprove that all blame lies on Germany became the central political issue, a national duty. *Historiography became, to paraphrase Clausewitz here, the continuation of the war by other means.*

To be sure: the legitimization of the reparations through the war guilty was something new. In the past, reparations were conceived as the obvious duty of the war’s loser. Paradoxically, this new reparation’s conception opened Germany a wide field for manoeuvring. If the thesis of the sole German guilty could be plausibly dismantled, this

would have deprived the moral basis of the peace treaty and approached a possible revision. *This conferred to history an immanent political importance.*

Indeed, the situation in Germany changed immediately after the signature of the Treaty of Versailles: The ‘collective hysteria’ to subsequently erupt made it possible for the *Auswärtige Amt* (foreign office), through the secret establishment of the department of the question of reasonability of the war, to put in place and control the ubiquitous and multifaceted propaganda machine of the campaign to prove their innocence in the question of who caused the war.

The virulent fight to disprove being the only responsible party for the war and the negative reception that the *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* (German Documents Concerning the Outbreak of War) by Karl Kautsky¹⁷ received even in neutral states, led the German government to prepare the publication of a more extensive collection of documents that would go beyond the scope of the July crisis. The idea of Berlin was that a relentless disclosure of pre-war diplomacy and its secrets would force the other great powers to shed light on their inconvenient secrets of their expansionist pre-war policies as well. This increase in complexity of historical conceptualization through the inclusion of long-term causes of the world war and references to the relentless power politics of the other great powers in the era of Imperialism would have certainly served a qualifying perception of the question of responsibility for the war. In turn, this could have provided ground for a broader distribution of guilt and, subsequently, the Treaty of Versailles and its order of peace could have been called into question.¹⁸

Towards Scholarly Editions

Already on July 21st 1919, when the ‘unsuitability’ of Kautsky’s collection of *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* for matters of foreign affairs was certain and its publication was dilatorily postponed by the government, the Bauer cabinet decided to issue a collection that should cover the period between 1871 and 1914.¹⁹ The appointment of editors had turned out to be difficult and tedious. In the end, the selection was not based on particular academic merit or editorial qualification²⁰, but rather on political considerations, naming three scholars publicly known as opposing official war policy. Next to the professor of international law Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy the foreign

office in February 1920 also nominated the orientalist, missionary and publicist Johannes Lepsius as well as the historian Friedrich Thimme²¹ as co-editors.

The series was planned to be published in three volumes, whose manuscripts should have been completed within four months in part-time work.²² Already in the first few meetings of the editor-troika, the beginning of the series was gradually set back from the initial caesura of the Treaty of Bucharest of 1913 to firstly the Bosnian crisis of 1908–1909, then the German-British attempts to find an understanding of 1898–1901, followed by the origins of the great European alliance-systems since the German-Austrian association of 1879, to finally the foundation of the German Empire on occasion of the peace agreements of Versailles and Frankfurt in 1871. Crucial in that respect were not least the accusation formulated by the victorious parties in the so-called cover-note of June 16, 1919. Here, it is said that “during long years, the ruling parties of Germany, true to the Prussian tradition, have sought supremacy in Europe in order to rule and tyrannize a conquered Europe”.²³ French historians vehemently propagated the same thesis of German war-guilt, going back to the foundation of the German empire. After the initial caesura had been finalized, the editorial work, pressed for time, was conducted in such an efficient manner²⁴ that the first series could already be presented to the public in 1922. The first series contained six volumes, covering the Bismarck period from 1871 to 1890. Five years later in 1927, after a “unique and admirably quick publication frequency”²⁵, the 40th and last volume concerned with the *Große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914* (*Great Policy of the European Cabinets*) was already available.²⁶

The edition of the *Große Politik* had an “enormous impact on world public opinion”²⁷ (Mario Toscano), entered the international debate about the causes of the war with an “unique, almost sensational effect”²⁸ (Wolfgang Schneider), even caused a “revolution in the research of the most recent time”²⁹ (Fritz T. Epstein) and constitutes politically an “essential asset of our foreign policy”³⁰ (Friedrich Thimme). Additionally, the edition encouraged and made possible an increasingly revisionist historiography, especially in the US. The academic merit of the edition over time became more significant than the underlying initial short-term political intentions.³¹

Despite the obvious political interference, the *Große Politik* encouraged the professionalization of the work of the historian in a dialectical process: As the official colored books were discredited due to the propaganda of World War One and could not exercise their political function any longer, a more legitimized publication with a more scientific touch had to take their place. This should be achieved by a delegation of the

editorial responsibility to external academics, which led to a general scientification of editorial practices. On the other side, however, the state acted as a board of censors. Therefore, the use of the *Große Politik* is subjected to source-critical problems regarding the internal selection and the anticipating self-censorship of the editors due to a selective sample of published documents orienting towards a German apology concerning the responsibility of the outbreak of World War I.

The phenomenon of applying pressure on oneself through the publication of documents finally led to a scientification of the collection of documents throughout the classic document editions of the great powers of the interwar period. Indeed, the success of the *Große Politik* forced Great Britain and France to follow suit and to publish scientific editions as well.

Similar to the case of the *Große Politik* that had originated with the genuinely political intention to absolve Germany from the guilt of being responsible for the war and that had ultimately aspired to revise the Treaty of Versailles under the cover of science, the decision to publish British and French editions was also influenced by political considerations.

Indeed, the decision to disclose the own archives didn't come voluntarily to the victorious nations. In fact, at the peace conference they were still able to fend off an according German proposal. But due to the soviet revelations in the press and the German solo effort of the publication of a gigantic document edition, Great Britain and France were quickly subjected to domestic and foreign suspicions that they tried to prevent an examination of their own responsibilities. Indeed, they had to bow to the pressure. At the same time, they tried to contain the positive reception that the *Große Politik* received and even lead to a revisionist and Germany-friendly school of thought in the US. However, their series, which were only published towards the end of the 1920s, simply came to late. On the one hand, the research concerning the outbreak of the war was at that point already influenced by the German documents. On the other hand, the German question began to shift in the spirit of Locarno.

In regard to work organization, the British edition of the *British Documents on the Origins of the War (1898–1914)* and the French edition *Documents diplomatiques français (1871–1914)* diverge considerably. The MacDonald cabinet improved the German approach by appointing renowned historians from the universities for the direction of the edition, guaranteeing an independent and scientific editing of the collection. Contrary to Thimme in Germany, who remained in service within the foreign

office even after the edition was completed, the tenured professors Gooch and Temperley would continue to pursue their obligation at their universities. The Poincaré government, however, installed a corporatist model of organization, a huge commission that included state officials and former diplomats next to renowned historians.

The German, the British and the French document editions contributed to the creation of a “new type of modern historian”³² (Fritz. T. Epstein): a historian paid by the state with a state assignment, who is nonetheless able to act independently. However, this solution that became necessary after official material was discredited by propaganda after World War I, was not yet fully developed in practice. Sophisticated institutional mechanisms that could have guaranteed the freedom of the historians were still lacking.

The American Way

As opposed to the European use of colored books that were published ad hoc by various governments and arose from contemporary political interests, the Americans established as early as 1861 a regularly published series of official documents, namely the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series. As a tool to justify executive branch actions to the legislative branch, the series represents a clear expression of a need for democratic legitimization. Despite its institutional and continuous publication, a number of indicators – such as selection, editing and authorship – point quite obviously in the direction of its colored book character during the first phase from 1861 to 1925. In any case, the series was designed in a legal manner and its concept matched more that of an encyclopedia for international law than that of a collection of relevant materials useful to historians. But even at this early time there is proof for the ways in which political interests could disrupt regular publication. An internal selection took place, as was the case with European colored Books.

The European development during the 20s of the twentieth century which, as a consequence of the controversy around the question of war guilt, had led to the publication of a voluminous, classical collection of documents with an academic slant was mirrored in the *Foreign Relations* series not so much with regard to content (since the role of the United States, viewed as isolationist, excluded them from this debate) as it was with regard to form. The entire editorial standard of the publication was adapted to the standard of the large European enterprises in three steps: in 1921, with the reorganization of the Department of State; in 1925, with the adoption of formal editorial

guidelines; and in 1929, with the overarching new conception of the official publication program.

Concurrent with an increase in quality, the backlog that had been accumulating ever since the turn of the century also saw a massive increase. This development continued all the way to exceeding today's 30-year limit. The phenomenon of growing delays stemmed from the unique continuous character of the American publication. Already early on in the phase from 1925 to 1948, the phenomenon of special subseries was created in the form of the World War Supplements. When compared to the publication of the regular series, these could be interpreted as either anticipatory in the sense of a politically opportune, early revelation, or as deferring in the sense of withholding politically undesirable materials. They present an excellent indicator for the historiographic representation of the handling of history based on contemporary political interests. To wit, during this phase, the accelerated volumes on the Japanese aggressor, colored book-like in character, were drafted. At the same time, the carefully edited publication of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 was held back until the end of the war in response to an intervention by Churchill and Roosevelt who feared that the imminent new post-war order might be compromised. It is telling that the special volumes on the Soviet Union and China were created starting in 1948, during the Cold War.

In regards to labor logistics, the Americans, unlike the Europeans, were not forced to call upon historians who were ostensibly outsiders and independent. On the contrary, they were able to utilize the Department's own civil servants. Nevertheless, during the 1920s, an increasing professionalization took place, as evidenced by the hiring of academically trained historians. However, the strong institutional links between historians and diplomats, which at times was so strong that the same section published both the *Foreign Relations* series and propagandistic pamphlets, caused continuous conflicts. It is typical for this solution involving civil servant historians that American publishers referred in good legalistic tradition to guidelines that impose the responsibility of an honest editing process while also explicitly pointing out exceptions that would justify non-publication. This is in direct contrast to the European publishers who had "sworn" to uphold the deontological commandment of objectivity by virtue of their own academic reputation.

The civil servant historians of the Department of State represent a new type of modern historian. Due to the strong institutional integration with the Administration, a new historian emerged. It is therefore not surprising that the historians discreetly reached back to the scholarly associations in order to counteract the obstructionist, inner-departmental forces that were trying to prevent publication by generating public pressure. These unofficial connections were officially sanctioned in 1957 through the establishment of an

Advisory Committee staffed by representatives from professional associations. From that point forward, these outside professors guaranteed the integrity of the departmental historian externally and pleaded internally (unsuccessfully so) for increased funding for the series.

Even for the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, there exist the source-criticism problems of external and internal selection. A number of evidentiary examples have shown how omission requests by foreign governments were granted despite the fact that the departmental historians in the cited cases had consistently argued in favor of uncensored publication. Internal selection, however, had far more devastating effects since the institutionalized process of the clearance of files by the appropriate sections of the Department was capable of utterly paralyzing the publication of the series. The increasing tendency of the United States toward global interventionism since World War II has shifted the significance of the Department of State and its selection for certain foreign policy operations to other organizations that often operate under tightest secrecy.

The German Documents after World War II

The history of the international publication enterprise *Documents on German Foreign Policy* has so far been neglected in historical research. Therefore, this analysis reaches far back in the meticulously planned and executed acquisition of documents by US and British army in Germany during the last phase of the Second World War. In doing so, it can be shown how an enterprise known as a historical edition project in fact initially served purely military and intelligence purposes. For US agencies, both Military as well as Department of State, the primary goal was to collect information on Japan in order to provide it for the conduct of war. However, it soon became clear that German archives contained almost no immediately relevant information for the war in East Asia. The secondary goal of the US project included the recovery of economic and scientific information, for example concerned with patents and German technology in terms of industrial espionage. In addition, the acquired documents provided valuable information both for the Safehaven-program as well as for the settlement of the question of foreign assets, primarily of Germans but also of neutrals. For the British administration and especially for the Foreign Office, however, the securing of sources to prove German war guilt was the first priority already in this phase.

The question of right of inspection into documents acquired by US and British forces provides an indicator for the asynchronous development of the cold war within the allied administrations of the West. The military, especially General Lucius D. Clay, urged in

this phase to grant Soviet (and as side-effect: French) delegations inspection into the acquired documents. The favoring of an equal Soviet participation in the evaluation of the acquired documents illustrates the efforts of the military in that phase to find a well-balanced *modus vivendi* in the question of a common administration of Germany. The US and British foreign offices, however, already followed a political route that reflected the logic of a bipolar world order. They were successful in making sure that the Soviet Union was not granted insight into the documents of the German foreign office.

Already during the military phase of the future edition project *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, the acquired historical information was used journalistically, meaning propagandistically, on an ad-hoc basis for political purposes. These politically motivated and not historically intended publications in a first phase aimed mainly against the neutrals. In the cases of Argentina and Spain, colored books or documents in the Department of State Bulletin were published in such a precipitous manner that the attacked governments were easily able to fend off the blow. In the case of Switzerland, the German archives served as the basis of information for the delegation negotiating the question of German assets.

In a second phase, the enterprise of the German documents was transformed from an intelligence operation into a historical project. This transformation also reflects the political climate in which the publications of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* were instrumentalized within the framework of the cold war. Devised in the course of denazification and certainly part of the reeducation-program, the goal of the historical project with regard to foreign affairs was to pre-emptively make German revisionism impossible and, with regard to domestic policy, to secure legitimation of the chosen German policy. *Expressis verbis*, the project was therefore aimed against the *Great Policy of the European Cabinets*, published by the Germans in the interwar period. Taking the English edition of *Documents on the Origins of the War* as an example, the governments involved in the project guaranteed the editors full editorial freedom. However, the inclusion of the historically accurate but propagandistically used *Nazi-Soviet Relations* makes it obvious that political interference was exerted. This publication – prepared, delayed and finally only published after the conference of foreign ministers in London in December 1947 – is especially qualified to serve as an indicator for the dating of the beginning of the propagandistic phase in the development of the cold war.

The edition of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* serves as an interesting special case as it is the only international publication of diplomatic documents of a state edited by different powers. This special constellation and the professionalization of the work of the historian as (official) editors during the interwar period in the course of the *Great*

Policy has indeed led to a substantial emancipation of the editor from their respective employer governments and a subsequently higher standard of objectivity. Still, the question of the official position of the editors of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* cannot be answered conclusively. On the one hand, the editors mostly stemmed from academia, where they also returned to work as university professors. On the other hand, they were paid by their respective foreign offices and were therefore unequivocally in an official position. Therefore, an ideal-typically not easily classifiable permeability between non-official historians out of academia and official historians emerges. However, this permeability between the two domains illustrates the needs and consequences of a total war that encouraged the development of a militia-style army of intellectuals – among them many German emigrants – who were temporarily officially employed due to their specialist and linguistic skills, mostly in the domain of intelligence.

Conclusions

Examining document editions alongside history, how often and how persistent non-academic interests try to influence the work of the historians and considering further which political interests allow for funding of such publication enterprises, it is idle to ask for the status of historiography. These exertions of influence are clear proof of the importance it is awarded. History provides legitimation; however, legitimation that people try to draw upon from the past is not necessarily given a priori. If critically understood historiography cannot provide a complete withdrawal of legitimation, it certainly can produce politically undesired results. These thoughts are not new per se: Ernst Renan already thought of them in 1882 when he said: «le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger.» (the progress of historical studies often is a threat to nationality).

Nonetheless, the interplay between politics and historical research is much more multifaceted than a narrowly understood dichotomy. The document editions were initiated, financed and censored out of political deliberations. At the same time, however, they also served the progress of historiography. For the first time, it was possible to access vast amounts of contemporary historical document material which lead to at least four effects:

First, it enabled to research contemporary history on a much broader, if still selective, basis of sources. In a time where history ended for many historians with the Congress of Vienna, this scientification of contemporary history was a central development, especially for German-speaking and Central European parts.

Second, the large interwar period document editions favored both an internationalization as well as a 'democratization' of historiography. They provided cheap and easy access to sources, allowing for a broad international debate. Of course, historians were also before not only conducting national historiography and the internationalization was mainly attributable to the fiercely disputed question of war guilt, but still only these editions were able to provide for a necessary density of sources to lead international debates. Thus, a historiography perceived as national, stemming from a century of nation building, was given the possibility to transfer its focus into the direction of an international history.

A 'democratization' was insofar visible as the access to sources was now broader and easier.

The call for academically trained historians as heads of official edition of diplomatic documents is closely connected to the constitution of a new profession within the historian's guild. Third, therefore, the large publication enterprises provided a boost towards the professionalization of the profession of the historian, from a mostly adjunct to a full-time position, paid in a manner in which even historians who were not employed at an university were able to live on. This led to a consolidation of the profession of the historian also outside academia und created – despite all of the associated problems – a new type of historian in public service.

Fourth, the large document editions of the interwar period led to a general institutionalization of such publications also outside the great powers (e.g. Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland). Thus, the large document editions contributed to the constitution and scientification of the discipline of contemporary history on a basis of sources that matched that of classic historiography, to a internationalization of academic historical debate, to a democratization of the basis of sources, to the professionalization of the profession of the historian and to a general institutionalization of document editions.