



PLANS, ENCOUNTERS, AND ...
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Few research plans drafted by historians survive the first encounter with the archives. And fewer still probably survive the encounter with the breadth of ideas at the seminars and dining tables at the Wissenschaftskolleg. All one can do is adapt and allow the plans to evolve amidst the encounters.

On September 2, 2013, I arrived at the Villa Walther, dragging my suitcases from Halensee S-Bahn station, unaware of the M19 bus route, the artery that connects the Wiko to the city. The Wiko offered a three-week intensive German language course in September. Taking this course proved valuable, not only as a means of reviving my moribund German, but also as an opportunity to meet other Fellows before the ten-month fellowship began formally on September 15.

From the outset, the disciplinary range of the Wiko was evident. Evolutionary biologists rubbed shoulders with sociologists, historians with literary scholars. In other circumstances, this interdisciplinary *mélange* might have fragmented and atomized, but

bonds were quickly formed. Conversations ranged widely. The rival merits of *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* featured as prominently as those of kin selection and multi-level selection. The apparently prosaic supported the academic, and the scholarly conversations buttressed the rhythms of everyday life. In this way, ideas seeped through disciplinary membranes during the seminars, lunches and dinners.

Given my project on international politics between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, 2013/14 was an ideal moment to spend at the Wissenschaftskolleg. *The Sleepwalkers*, Christopher Clark's tome on the origins of the First World War, had just been translated into German, under the title *Die Schlafwandler*, and had vaulted to the top of *Der Spiegel's* bestseller list and into the centre of public debate on the commemoration of the war. Some viewed Clark's arguments as a timely and well-researched revision of the Fischer thesis, which had held German leaders primarily responsible for the outbreak of the war. Others considered Clark's view that the leaders of the six belligerents – not including Belgium – had all contributed to the demise of the European peace as ill-founded, and possibly downright dangerous.

My project, however, was less interested in the origins of the war than in the maintenance of peace between the great powers within Europe for over four decades after the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. It was still a violent era, particularly evident in the colonial wars fought by European states. Yet these four decades were also the longest period of *great power peace* in modern European history until the very end of the Cold War. The question of who had started the war or how it had come about had led successive generations of historians to privilege conflict at the expense of cooperation, aggression at the expense of restraint, and fragility at the expense of stability in their analyses of international relations. Of course changing the question – in this case to why great power peace had endured so long – is an age-old trick, from students bewildered in an examination to politicians evading an awkward topic. In this project, the proposed payoff was that an emphasis on peace – how it was constructed, maintained and imagined – would draw historians' attention to issues in international relations often considered marginal, such as international law and ethics.

The research plan was simple. I proposed to look at a series of crises between the 1870s and 1914, in which different governments considered the use of military force against a great power rival. Moreover, various international relations theories, such as offensive realism and power transition theory, predicted war in the conditions of the great power system between 1871 and 1914 as the likely outcome; indeed, according to the logic of

some theories, war was a rational choice. I planned to investigate why political and military leaders had decided against war on so many occasions before 1914 and then to use these studies as a basis to analyse the intellectual hinterland of their reasoning. This would enable me to assess how restraints were embedded in the cultures of international relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the course of the year, I would conduct research in archives throughout Germany and produce two articles related to the project.

Well, plans. In part my plans foundered on the completion of earlier projects. In the first few months of the fellowship, I finished editing my book manuscript, a collection of essays and a review article on recent literature on the origins of the war, including *The Sleepwalkers*, which appeared in the July 2014 issue of the *English Historical Review*.

Being at the Wiko and in Berlin also changed my normal pattern of working. It is a sociable institution in a sociable city. To the extent that I used to have a pattern, it involved working in the morning, drifting in the afternoon and catching up in the evening. But the evenings in Berlin quickly filled up – indoor football on Monday, seminars at the Freie Universität on Tuesday, dinner at the Wiko on Thursday, visitors at the weekends, and, of course, *Tatort* on Sunday. Then there were frequent concerts, lectures and discussions about the political issues of the day at the Wiko, events that were often held on Wednesday evenings. And so I changed and, despite myself, I eventually found the daily routine of reading, lunch, more reading, dinner and socializing in the evening calming, even appealing. It was a good way to work.

Research conditions also led me to prioritize reading over writing. The easy access to archives in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany and the excellence of the Wiko's library in getting all kinds of sources, from rare source editions to long runs of reviews, ensured that the fellowship was an opportunity to immerse myself in reading. I found great pleasure in being able to hop on my bike and cycle to archives and the newspaper library or in seeing references to contemporary articles and debates and finding the volumes of reviews waiting for me in the library the following day.

Encountering new ideas also created productive disruption. Cooperation and conflict, altruism and selfishness, power and justification, empathy and violence – the same words, but different concepts, that ignored disciplinary borders and became the currency of interdisciplinary exchange. The opportunity to discuss their meaning and application was stimulating, and the reading tips were invaluable. I benefitted greatly from discussions with biologists, sociologists and economists, not to mention other historians. These

encounters led to new questions about and perspectives on my original research project. For example I became more interested in how politicians, diplomats, scholars and other writers before 1914 accounted for the transformation of international relations, from an imagined beginning of human society to the system of great power politics. Their thoughts on international relations reflected their assumptions about human nature and sociability. This raised wider questions about the origins of later re-education programmes under occupation regimes, how people's minds became an object of international politics and to what extent international institutions were considered capable of transforming human nature. Others introduced me to work on frameworks of justification in shaping social interaction. Historians generally regard public justifications of foreign policy with scepticism – and rightly so. Yet actions require justification and politicians recognized this restraint before they embarked on a particular course of action. I became increasingly interested in examining what frameworks leaders used to justify their foreign policies to their own subjects and an international audience and to what extent these justifications were explicitly shared between rival great powers. These justifications provide an alternative way of analysing the changing normative environment in Europe on the eve of the war. From discussions about legitimacy and discourse to the *Sprachkrise* of the late nineteenth century, new vistas opened on a regular basis.

The Tuesday Colloquium has its own particular rituals, which I suppose vary from year to year. People scurry through the door into the *Große Kolloquienraum* just before 11 a.m., are entertained by the chair's introduction of that week's speaker and absorb an hour of erudite argument and insight. Then the questions come. And because these questions are generally posed by scholars from other disciplines, or historians working in a completely different field, it is difficult to anticipate them, at least during the first few weeks, when the conventions of the colloquium are established. And it is all the better for that. I think. Curiosity, anxiety, expectation and doubt jostled alongside each other in my mind as I prepared for the colloquium. At the end of the talk and the discussion, aside from a vague feeling of relief, I had a host of new questions, from the fungibility of power in international politics to the significance of Futurism.

So after the encounters, the socializing, and the sheer enjoyment of being at the Wiko had laid waste to my original plans, I left Berlin on July 15 with questions and ideas. And some writing to do.