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* Marc Trachtenberg, *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980)
* Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2012)

I spent 1971—all twelve months—in Paris doing the research for my doctoral dissertation. In terms of the mechanics of research, it was a different world back then. Photocopying was very expensive, so I had to copy by hand most of the passages I thought I might want to use. And I didn’t even know before I arrived which sources I wanted to examine. The published guides to the archives didn’t tell you much, and the more detailed finding aids were all in Paris. Looking back now, it is clear I didn’t know what I was doing.

That point applied not just to the logistics of research, but also to more substantive matters. I was working on the reparation question after the First World War. Germany had been required by the peace treaty worked out in 1919 to pay compensation to France for the damage done during the war, and this issue played a very important role in international politics in the immediate postwar period. I had selected—or actually, more or less drifted into—that topic for very general reasons. It seemed to me that too much of the work on the origins of the Second World War had focused on Hitler and on the 1930s. It seemed to me that the 1920s had been neglected, that the line between the 1920s and the 1930s had been overdrawn, and that people had not paid as much attention to what we would now call “structural” factors—at the time, I had not heard of that term—as they should have. It was clear that there had been a struggle over the Versailles system, not just in the 1930s, but even more importantly in the period right after World War I, and that that struggle had focused on the conflict over the reparations. I was in the Berkeley Ph.D. program in history, and at that time grad students in that program were required to have an outside field; I had chosen economics. I therefore thought I had the background to study the reparation issue, and I assumed, without knowing much about the availability of evidence, or about how recently it had been released, that there would be enough material to support a dissertation on the topic.

Before I arrived in Paris, I had learned what I could about the topic from the published sources, and I had absorbed what was then the standard view that the reparations were obviously beyond Germany’s capacity to pay, that the “vengeful” French had taken a hard line on the question, and that Britain and America approached the issue in a much more reasonable and conciliatory manner. My goal, when I started to do my research, was to try to figure out why the French had behaved in that way. And in dealing with that issue I just stumbled around, looking at whatever sources I could find that seemed to have some bearing on the topic.

The Klotz Papers, at the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine in Nanterre, just outside of Paris, was one such source. Louis-Lucien Klotz was the finance minister in the Clemenceau government, the government that negotiated the peace treaty in 1919. I had already learned that Clemenceau had been contemptuous of Klotz—the “only Jew I ever met who has no capacity whatever for finance,” he called him—and that his key advisor on reparation and related issues was Louis Loucheur, the minister of industrial reconstruction. But given Klotz’s position, his papers certainly seemed worth looking at.

And what a surprise they contained! They had the records of the peace conference commission responsible for working out the terms of the reparation settlement; Loucheur was the French representative on that group. The British delegates had suggested some very large figures, and Loucheur clearly thought they were preposterous and that much lower figures were in order. The Germans, in his view, could pay about $30 billion, but as for the British figures, which were four times as large, “we leave to the poets of the future the task of finding solutions.”[[1]](#footnote-1) I remember how startled I was when I read this. Could it be that we had all been sold a bill of goods, and that the standard view about the vindictive French and the more moderate Anglo-Saxons was simply a myth? I had found a loose thread in the fabric of the conventional wisdom, and once I started to pull on it, it unraveled very quickly.

But the point is that this was something I had just stumbled into. I had not started out with the goal of proving anything of the sort. I was not even trying to test the conventional view, which, when I began my research, I basically shared. And that was not the only time I came across key pieces of evidence more or less by accident.

I remember another case, also in an archive just outside of Paris, that fit into that pattern. I was trying to understand NATO strategy in the 1950s, and I had learned, especially from my friend Bob Wampler, that an important decision had been made at the end of 1954 to adopt a strategy for the defense of Europe that placed very heavy emphasis on nuclear weapons. Specifically, this was the decision to adopt a NATO document called MC-48, and I wanted to find out as much as I could about that document and the thinking that supported it. Wampler had gotten some terrific material from the British archives, and I wanted to see what I could find in the archives of the French ministry of defense at Vincennes. The key source there was the papers of General Clément Blanc, the French army chief of staff at the time. And I found some remarkable material on MC-48 in that collection, which I used in an article on the subject, first published in French in 1996, and then republished (with some changes) in English in 2012 in *The Cold War and After*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As I found out when I went back to that archive, I had been given a file in the Blanc papers that was not supposed to be given out to researchers and that had been given to me by accident. The reason it was still classified was quite clear: the key thing about MC-48 is that it rested on the assumption that if the decision to launch a major nuclear attack was to be effective, it had to be made very quickly, and that meant that the military authorities would play the central role in making that decision. The French government, understanding the great political sensitivity of this issue, naturally wanted to keep the public from finding out what had been decided. Documents showing that this was the government’s goal were actually in the file. It was quite understandable why French governments, even after the end of the Cold War, wanted to keep people from knowing about all this.

I know of other examples where people were given important documents by accident. An old student of mine, working in the Taylor Papers at the National Defense University, was given important documents on the mistaken assumption that he had a security clearance and would not use them in anything he published. Those documents showed how Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara bullied the Joint Chiefs of Staff into taking a position on the issue of deploying nuclear missiles in Europe that varied enormously from their real position.

Is it right to use material obtained in this way? I personally don’t have any problem with it. I tend to view historians like me as engaged in a kind of game with people who determine which documents we’re allowed to see. Their goal is often to keep us for “getting the dirt” on policy-makers. That’s why they use the term “sanitized” to refer to documents where key passages, containing the “dirt,” have been deleted before being released. Our goal, on the other hand, is to get the “dirt”—that is, the full truth. And in playing that game, we naturally use whatever assets their inefficiency provides for us.

Sometimes we have to develop new methods for that very purpose. One of the main things I ended up doing, when I was writing my book on the 1945-63 period, was to collect variant versions of the same document—versions declassified differently in different repositories, or different accounts of the same meeting (like U.S. and British accounts of the same Anglo-American meetings—accounts found by doing work in both British and American archives). The comparisons are often quite illuminating: they show the nature of the bias incorporated into the body of declassified material by virtue of the fact that declassification is a politicized process; once you identify the bias you can control for it when working out your own interpretation.[[3]](#footnote-3) The point here is that the methods you end up using are not just the ones you learned in graduate school—certainly not just ones you learn in a “methods course.” They’re methods you develop to deal with particular problems you encounter as you actually do your work.

Again, these are things you more or less just stumble into. You can never tell what obstacles you’ll encounter. Nor can you tell what strokes of luck you’ll have. I needed, at one point, to do some work on the American nuclear strategists, and for that purpose I wanted to get access to some of the old material at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica. I also needed to do some interviewing. It turned out people were very accommodating. Fred Kaplan had recently published his book *The Wizards of Armageddon*,[[4]](#footnote-4) which many of the people I needed help from did not like. Kaplan, they thought, was very smart, but he was not particularly sympathetic to what they did. They were ready to help me because they thought there was a good chance I’d redress the imbalance and provide a more positive view of what they had done.

I had another stroke of luck with the Kennedy tapes. I happened to run into McGeorge Bundy, formerly Kennedy’s national security advisor, at a conference at Columbia, and he told me in passing that the Kennedy Library had just released the transcript of the tapes of the meetings held at the very beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. Why hadn’t I heard about this? It turned out that the *New York Times* had published a story about the release of the transcripts a bit earlier, but had not treated it as very important. The *Times* instead quoted the chief archivist at the Kennedy Library as saying the new material contained “no surprises”—that “it doesn’t change anything. There is nothing new of substance.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Still, I thought the new material would be worth looking at. And indeed there were some major surprises in the October 16th tapes.

I didn’t plan, however, on using that material in anything I was writing. At the time, I was much more interested in the Berlin crisis and European issues than in the Cuban crisis. But a friend of mine, Steve Van Evera, was taking over as editor of *International Security.* He said the first issue to be published under his editorship was very important, and he asked me if I had anything he could publish. I said I had come across some terrific material relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis and I could work something up, which I did. But that draft turned out to be unpublishable—discursive, unfocused, and without any real point to it. Steve then had me work with his friend John Mearsheimer, who I had not met at that time, and John told me exactly how to restructure it, so that the analysis spoke directly to the questions security studies people in political science were interested in. That restructuring worked, and John’s contribution was so great that I asked him if he would like to be listed as co-author. He said no, that this article would be important for me, that it would in fact establish my reputation in the field, and he didn’t want to dilute the effect. I’ll always be grateful to him for that.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So what’s the bottom line here? You try to be systematic when you’re doing your work. You try to have some kind of plan for tackling the topic you’re interested in. But like war plans, which, as the saying goes, don’t survive the first contact with the enemy, research strategies should never be viewed as strait-jackets. You might try to be systematic, but you’re always amazed by how hit-or-miss the research process is, and the key thing is that you have to be ready to adjust your strategy to whatever obstacles or opportunities turn up. “On s’engage, puis on voit”—you throw yourself in, and then you look around: that’s how Napoleon said you had to approach battle. In real life, of course, it’s important to not over-improvise, and in tackling a problem in international relations it’s important to think hard about how you propose to proceed. As Eisenhower put the point, “plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” And that point applies not just to military planning but also to planning a research project in the archives or otherwise: in doing research you really need to be more flexible than you might think.

1. See Marc Trachtenberg, *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 59-60, and Marc Trachtenberg, "Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference" (with comments and reply), *Journal of Modern History* (March 1979), pp. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Marc Trachtenberg, “La formation du système de défense occidentale: les États-Unis, la France et MC 48,” in Maurice Vaïsse, Pierre Mélandri and Frédéric Bozo, *La France et* *l'OTAN, 1949-1996* (Paris, 1996); republished, with some changes, in English translation in Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2012). See especially pp. 143-49 in the English version. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Marc Trachtenberg, “Declassification Analysis: The Method, and Some Examples” (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/documents/doclist.html>), and Marc Trachtenberg, “Declassification Analysis: More Grist for the Mill” (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/decl/grist.htm>). These were posted on a website I created as a kind of online supplement to the book in question: Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fox Butterfield, “Library Releases Cuban Crisis Tapes,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1983, p. A3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Marc Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Security* 10:1 (Summer 1985). The editors also asked me to select some key excerpts from the documents for publication and write an introduction to the documents. That material was also published in that issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)