ZARA STEINER

Zara Alice Shakow Steiner

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by

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Zara Steiner was a historian of international relations, specialising in British foreign policy around 1914 and, more generally, Europe in the era of the two world wars. Born and educated in the United States, with a PhD from Harvard, she taught at Cambridge for more than thirty years and became an especially inspirational supervisor of doctoral students. Her magnum opus was the huge two-volume study of Europe's interwar international relations, *The Lights That Failed* (2005) and *The Triumph of the Dark* (2011).

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ZARA STEINER (*photo: Michael Derringer*)

‘An American, a woman and a Jew writing about the Foreign Office. It should not be allowed.’ Sir Owen O’Malley’s opening words did not sound encouraging, and Zara Steiner knew he was voicing what many others privately thought. Yet she persisted with the interview—and with the relationship. O’Malley became one of her closest FO confidants and a good friend, who bequeathed her several volumes of his papers.

It is a revealing anecdote. Those prejudices, her persistence and the eventual outcome together typify the saga of Zara Steiner as a historian. She devoted much of her academic life to studying the British Foreign Office and, more generally, the mores and mentalities of diplomats and foreign ministries across the world. And she did so from a distinctive perspective: as an American teaching in Britain, as a woman fighting for recognition in a male-dominated profession and as a human being whose Jewish identity became increasingly important to her as time passed.

Becoming a historian

Zara Alice Shakow was born in Manhattan on 6 November 1928, the daughter of Joseph Shakow, who ran an outfitter’s business at 915 Broadway—at the back of the celebrated Flatiron Building—and his wife Frances (née Price). They lived in an apartment block on the Upper West Side, not far from the home of Zara’s grandfather, Abraham. He and his wife Eva had migrated from Lithuania to Manhattan in the late nineteenth century to escape Tsarist oppression, changing their surname from Chaikowitz to Shakow after arrival in the USA. Abraham and Eva had two sons, David and Joseph. There was only enough money to send one of them to college. According to family lore, Abraham tossed a coin to decide. David went to Harvard and in time became a distinguished clinical psychologist who did pioneering research on schizophrenia.[1] Joseph stayed in Manhattan and in time took over the family business.

Zara was educated at Julia Richman High School on the West Side; other alumnae born in the 1920s include Lauren Bacall and Judy Holliday. In later life, she claimed that she decided to be a historian because her history teacher there was always beautifully dressed, and bought her clothes from Bergdorf Goodman, the luxury department store. From her very early days Zara associated history with elegance.[2] Zara adored her father but was not close to her mother. She had an older brother, Milton, who was drafted into the US forces during the Second World War and died tragically in a flying accident. Joseph was distraught and died a few months later in

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/27/obituaries/dr-david-shakow-80-noted-us-psychologist.html.
[2] Email from her daughter Dr Deborah Steiner, 5 July 2020.

December 1944. His widow soon remarried and Zara could not wait to get away from home. Many of the young women at Julia Richman went on to nearby City College—then largely Jewish—for commercial training, but Zara won a scholarship to Swarthmore, a co-educational liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. Swarthmore was a Quaker foundation. It did not have a 'Jewish quota', unlike most private educational institutions in the US at this time, and it also welcomed conscientious objectors from the war as well as many veterans. Zara flourished in this diverse and open environment and credited the college for giving her an excellent education. The annual calendar from Swarthmore always had pride of place above the phone in her kitchen.[3]

Apart from a summer job in Mexico, Zara had never been outside the United States before her arrival—almost 20—at St Anne's College, Oxford, in October 1948. She had been intending to study Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE), but was informed by her 'moral tutor', M. D. R. Leys, that politics was not really an academic subject and so Miss Shakow should read history instead. Did she 'need' a First? Having ascertained what that was, Zara answered with a firm negative, since she had no expectations of an academic career. 'If you don't need a First', said Mary Leys (who taught history at St Anne's from 1919 until her retirement in 1955), 'we will send you out of the college to be tutored. To whom would you like to go? Look at the examination statutes, and come up with a list of tutors and I will see what I can do.' Knowing no better, Zara came back with a list of the historians whose names she recognised, and then 'the wonderful Miss Leys managed to get them', even Hugh Trevor-Roper and Isaiah Berlin. 'The whole experience was like drinking champagne,' Zara reflected nostalgically seventy years later, but she did admit to 'some serious hangovers along the way'. One horror moment not easily forgotten was the silence that ensued after she read out her essay 'Why did the Austro-Hungarian Empire last so long?' to Hugh Seton-Watson. It was a very long silence, 'five minutes by my watch—I was ready to go home on the next boat'. In desperation, she finally asked 'Is the essay really unacceptable?' 'No', came the reply, 'I was thinking of an appropriate question.' Having overcome Seton-Watson's acute shyness, the two of them got on well and he invited her to attend a seminar given by his father, R. W. Seton-Watson, about his work as a specialist adviser on the Balkans at the Paris peace conference. 'He showed how the key decisions evolved, some due to expert advice but many made by ignorant politicians who had no idea of geography. I sat in the back with a small group of other unknowns, mostly research students, who said not a word. We were left spellbound.'[4]

[3] Email from her son Dr David Steiner, 5 July 2020.

[4] Z. Steiner, 'Beyond the Foreign Office papers: the making of an international historian', *International History Review*, 39 (2017), 546–70, quoting from pp. 546–7. This reflective memoir, though inaccurate on some minor details, is a useful guide to her early career.

In her final year at Oxford, Zara took A. J. P. Taylor's special subject, 'The Policy of the Ententes' before the Great War (she was the only woman in the class of seven). Intended to introduce undergraduates to primary materials, the paper used as its main source the multi-volume collection of *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*, edited by G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley and published between 1926 and 1938. Taylor used these materials to illuminate and interrogate the many memoirs, biographies and collections of foreign documents that had also been published about the origins of the Great War—a topic of renewed debate after 1945.

The Foreign Office and the Great War

Thanks to Taylor, Zara was now 'hooked' on the First World War—but also stumped, for two reasons. First, when she approached him, just before Finals, to ask if he would take her on as a PhD student, he told her scornfully that this degree was 'a German invention which the Americans had bastardised and was not worth pursuing'. He pointed out that no one teaching her had been sullied with a PhD, but he did offer to help if she wanted to write a book. That idea, however, was financially a non-starter. Instead she embarked on a PhD back in the United States at Radcliffe, the female college of Harvard, with a fellowship that would cover her for the first two years. She had hoped to work with William Langer, who ran a diplomatic history seminar at Harvard, but he had just been seconded to Washington to help set up the Office of National Estimates within the CIA. Eventually she was placed under the wing of David Owen, a historian of the nineteenth-century opium wars, who had a limited amount to say on her research. But Owen—a fabled Harvard teacher—was supportive in his own way, prevailing on the Radcliffe authorities to subsidise a year in London in 1953–4 so Zara could do research and attend the diplomatic history seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, run by the formidable Dame Lillian Penson (London University's first female Vice-Chancellor) who was a specialist on the pre-1914 period and had assisted Gooch and Temperley.

Zara's other problem was what exactly she could research. Working with Taylor had left her inspired but also frustrated. Original documents in the Public Record Office were open to ordinary researchers up to 1902—a restriction not relaxed until the Public Records Act of 1958, which introduced a rolling fifty-year rule (amended to thirty years in 1967). Gooch and Temperley had been allowed special access as part of the British government's attempt (like their counterparts across Europe) to show that its policy had been both rational and right in the run-up to August 1914. Although the two editors managed to insert plenty of documents that suggested a more complex picture, there were strict limits on their scholarly freedom. In any case, most of the

papers they published were telegrams and dispatches exchanged between the Foreign Secretary and ambassadors abroad. Even after careful scrutiny, readers still knew little about how decisions recorded in these messages had been made. What intrigued Zara were asides in the printed volumes to mysterious 'minutes' by junior officials. Might they shed light on actual policymaking? Was there a way to dig them out? That became the focus of her PhD research during the 1950s.

Her approach was greeted with some scepticism, but Lillian Penson gave her an introduction to C. H. Fone, the Foreign Office Librarian. The Library was located in Cornwall House near Waterloo Station. Charles Fone was 'a small man, kind, observant and more than helpful' but he considered her project ludicrous. 'Officials do not make policy, they execute', he exclaimed. 'These words (or some such)', recalled Zara, 'were like a red rag as far as I was concerned. I insisted that there must be papers from such officials, as well as private letters to and from foreign secretaries, among the many kept in the library stacks.' Eventually—'to his credit and unheard of today'—Fone took her into a dusty room and opened cabinets that had clearly not been cleaned for years. Out fell packets of papers, tied up with pink ribbon. 'Oh dear', he said, 'you had better have a look.' She did—and the eventual result was her 1957 doctoral dissertation, from which came her first book *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1969 (at the price of £3.25).[5]

To many historians today a volume bearing that title might sound like desiccated Rankeanism. It is therefore worth underlining two things. First, by the standards of the day Zara was engaged in cutting-edge contemporary history, *Zeitgeschichte*, effectively bypassing the normal rules of government declassification. This research was tribute to the pertinacity she had shown ever since fleeing from home after her father died, spurred along the way by academic women who had evidently become role models, such as Mary Leys and Lillian Penson. Second, her interest was not in the documents per se ('what one clerk said to another', in Taylor's once dismissive aside) but in what we would now call the culture of the Foreign Office. She wanted to discover the ethos of the place and understand the people who inhabited it. Since some of them were still alive, she tracked them down, secured introductions and gradually won their confidence—especially those such as Owen O'Malley who felt themselves a square peg in a round hole (a feeling she understood).

The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy was, at one level, an institutional history that still showed some marks of the original doctoral dissertation. But it was well received by reviewers. Henry R. Winkler in *The American Historical Review* called it 'an unusual and penetrating study', with 'sensitive and sensible vignettes' of leading

[5] Z. S. Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Cambridge, 1969); quotations from Steiner, 'Beyond the Foreign Office papers', pp. 548–9.

officials. He concluded that 'she succeeds brilliantly in her intended "portrait of an institution", and succeeds as well in adding a fresh perspective to British foreign policy before the war, not an inconsiderable achievement in what some have recently described as an oversaturated field of investigation'. Likewise, Roy Bridge in the *English Historical Review* judged that, although the book was 'obviously of the greatest importance to the administrative historian', her 'shrewd observations on the foreign policy that eventually emerged from the processes she analyses make her monograph essential reading for anyone concerned with those currents of high policy that led Britain into war in 1914'.[6]

Overall, the book proved Charles Fone both right and wrong. Right in that, during the first half of the period she studied, 'officials' had only a limited influence on policy. This was particularly true under Lord Salisbury, who ran the Foreign Office until 1900 as well as being Prime Minister, and also during the foreign secretaryship of Lord Lansdowne (1900–5)—although he was more inclined to consult the most senior officials, especially Thomas Sanderson, the Permanent Under-Secretary between 1894 and 1906, who had joined the FO as a junior clerk way back in 1859. On the other hand, she argued—in one of the most innovative parts of the book—that the dynamics changed dramatically between 1906 and 1910, for both administrative and personal reasons. First, the administrative reforms of 1906, encouraged by Lansdowne, raised junior officials from a purely clerical role through introduction of 'minutes'—the magic word that had stimulated Zara's quest years before—so that a stream of comment, rising up the hierarchy, now reached the foreign secretary on all the issues. The reforms also strengthened the institutional position of the Permanent Under-Secretary as the co-ordinator of business. Intertwined with this on the personal level, Sanderson's successor from 1906 to 1910, Sir Charles Hardinge, formed a close working relationship with Lansdowne's Liberal successor Sir Edward Grey, who served as Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916. This co-operation also reflected their shared conviction about Germany's hostile intentions. But Hardinge's less equable successor, Sir Arthur Nicolson (1910–16)—a former Ambassador to St Petersburg—wanted to turn the entente with France and Russia into a firm anti-German alliance and fell out with Grey about the balancing act that the Foreign Secretary was trying to play towards the continental great powers. In addition, the reforms of 1906, combined with the escalating tempo of international events, began to overwhelm the elaborate new system of indexing and registry, creating a bureaucratic nightmare. In the crisis of 1914, FO officials were largely marginalised: British policy was determined by the interplay between Grey and factions within the Liberal Cabinet.

[6] Reviews by H. R. Winkler, *American Historical Review*, 75 (1970), 2062, and by F. R. Bridge, *English Historical Review*, 87 (1972), 595–7.

The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914 made Zara Steiner the ideal choice to write about Britain in the publisher Macmillan's ambitious series of national volumes about the origins of the First World War. Fritz Fischer had recently sparked impassioned new debates about German war 'guilt' and also the interrelation of domestic politics and foreign policy, so the time was ripe for explorations of 1914 from the vantage points of other key capitals. Some of the material in the first half of *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (1977) grew out of Zara's earlier book, as she admitted: 'in the diplomatic sections, I will repeatedly argue that British action was a response to outward events and that those responses were made by a few men who are easily identifiable'. But analysis of the domestic scene in Britain took Zara into new terrain as she mapped the economic, social and cultural influences on those who made policy and also tried to gauge the impact of 'public opinion'—areas that some reviewers felt her first book had not properly addressed.[7]

This work attracted greater media attention than the first. 'Here at last we have that balanced, learned account which will make it easily the best guide to this complicated and important topic', wrote Paul Kennedy in *The Sunday Times*. 'The structure and layout of the book are admirable; the style is clear and flowing; and the erudition and clarity of argument convincing.' In the *Financial Times* C. P. Snow praised 'a sober, sensible account of how this country became impelled into the First World War', and judged the author to be 'a very good historian, with exceptionally balanced judgement'. And her old mentor, A. J. P. Taylor for *The Observer*, offered a typically waspish compliment that her 'brilliant exposition provides many ideas to argue over and some to agree with'.[8]

The essence of the book is best seen through the lens of the revised edition, published a quarter-century later in 2003.[9] In the new preface, Zara confessed how 'shocked and alarmed' she had become 'as the updated bibliography grew and grew'. She could see 'grounds for recasting the entire book' but in the end took what she called 'the coward's way out' and asked Professor Keith Neilson, a specialist on Tsarist foreign policy, to 'make the necessary additions and corrections to the original text' and also to 'completely rewrite the chapter on Britain and Russia' up to 1912 which she called, with typical self-criticism, 'the weakest in the original volume'. She also admitted that, as the heat of the Fischer debate cooled, she had 'modified' her views on German responsibility for the war but still believed that 'Germany and Austria must carry the major weight of that heavy burden'.[10]

[7] Z. S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977), p. 3.
[8] Quoted from the advertisement for the second edition on https://www.amazon.com/Britain-Origins-First-World-War/dp/033373467X.
[9] Z. S. Steiner and K. Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (revised edn, London, 2003).
[10] Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. vi–vii, preface by Z. Steiner. Her

As Zara was aware, the new detail sometimes seriously stretched the old fabric while also not doing full justice to the wealth of recent research, but this was a book intended to offer students and scholars an overview of one of the most tangled topics of modern history. And it accomplished that most successfully, becoming a staple on course reading-lists across the Anglophone world and beyond. To some critics, it always betrayed its roots in an intense engagement in the Foreign Office papers and, therefore, in 'the Foreign Office mind'—making it too sympathetic to Grey. Certainly, a different perspective emerged during the 2010s with historians using new sources that served to shift prime responsibility for the war away from Germany towards Russia and Serbia. In so doing they also questioned the wisdom of London's policy—not in a new, all-out blame game, but with a distinct whiff of 'what if?' Thus, Grey and his entourage were faulted by Christopher Clark for inept diplomacy, excessive anti-Germanism and 'a partisan indifference to the power-political realities of Austria-Hungary's position.' Similarly, Sean McMeekin criticised Grey for sending 'misleadingly positive signals' to Berlin—'feigning neutrality and yet clearly taking the Franco-Russian side' in a policy characterised by 'blindness and blundering'.[11]

Yet Zara's fundamental argument was always that Grey had limited options. His was the foreign policy of a world power in decline, seeking to juggle precariously the simultaneous threats to its global empire from France and Russia and to the continental balance from Wilhelmine Germany. Her argument was sharpened by a new paragraph in the revised edition, explicitly pondering 'what alternative policies, if any, existed that might have proved superior to the one that Grey followed?' Even if he had overtly committed himself to France and Russia, as urged by Hardinge and many FO advisers, it is debatable whether this would have deterred Vienna and Berlin—both of them ready, almost fatalistically, to gamble on war. On the contrary, it might have encouraged France and Russia to become more assertive and thereby exacerbated German fears of encirclement. As for neutrality, that did not seem a plausible option. If the *Kaiserreich* emerged triumphant from war, bolstered by the resources of Belgium and northern France, it would be much more of threat to Britain. Alternatively, if France and Russia were victorious, they would have no further use for a Britain that had abandoned them and would surely turn on its imperial possessions. In short, Grey told one of his critics privately, the alternatives to his balancing act were either 'complete isolation' or 'definite alliance' with one or other group of European powers—neither position being conceivable for a world power with both imperial and

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collaborator was the author of *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894–1917* (Oxford, 1995) and the new chapter 7 was explicitly based on that work: ibid., p. 316, note 1.

[11] C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*: *How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), pp. 165–6, 559; S. McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (London, 2013), pp. 402–3.

European interests.[12] But it was not a happy position. As he warned the Commons in his now celebrated speech on 3 August 1914, 'We are going to suffer, I am afraid, terribly in this war whether we are in it or whether we stand aside.'[13]

Teacher and mentor

While a research student in London, Zara met and married the author and critic George Steiner, a product of Chicago and Harvard, who had just finished his Oxford DPhil and was then a writer for *The Economist*. George's family had twice escaped the Nazis, first from Vienna and then Paris, leaving him with an acute sense of having just survived Hitler's diabolical project to make Europe *judenfrei*. George and Zara started married life in 1955 in a big house in Phillimore Gardens. She recalled that their flat there was 'more costly than most (£4 per week) because it had central heating, i.e. one radiator in the hall and a paraffin stove in the bedroom that had to be lit every morning'.[14] George did not have a permanent academic post and they moved to Princeton in 1956, where he was a visiting scholar for two years at the Institute of Advanced Study, then to Innsbruck for a year, before returning to Princeton in 1959–60 when he was the Gauss Lecturer in literary criticism. Eventually, in 1961, George was appointed a Founding Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, still in construction, where they lived in a College flat.

It was during the Princeton years that Zara became a mother, first to David and then Deborah—both of whom grew up to have distinguished careers in academia and education. Moving the family to and fro across the Atlantic and then settling them into Cambridge absorbed a great deal of Zara's time and energy (George not being noted as a man around the house). But she was able to do supervisions for St John's College in various history papers thanks to the support of Harry Hinsley, the university's historian of international relations.

Fifty years later Zara retained happy memories of supervising 'outstanding students', but it still rankled that she had been obliged to teach after rugby and before Hall, between 5pm and 7pm—'hardly an ideal time for a mother', she observed

[12] Steiner and Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, quoting respectively pp. 274–5 and 99. Their emphasis on the constraints on Britain's power and its policy in 1914 has been underlined by more recent scholars of Grey's diplomacy—see e.g. A. Mombauer, 'Sir Edward Grey, Germany, and the outbreak of the First World War: a re-evaluation', *The International History Review*, 38 (2016), 301–25, esp. pp. 317, 320.

[13] House of Commons Debates, 3 Aug. 1914, vol. 65, col. 1823.

[14] Steiner, 'Beyond the Foreign Office papers', 549.

caustically.[15] One of those history and rugger students was Peter Clarke—then in his second year at St John's, in later life an FBA and Professor of Modern British History at Cambridge. He recalls having to trudge through 'the heavy mud of a building site' for the weekly supervision. But he and his supervision partner 'quickly agreed that this was worth it for the insight as well as dedication with which Zara led us through our studies, with essays on well-defined questions, submitted in advance, and with her own helpful comments written on them'. Today, Peter adds, this might sound like 'a banal recitation of what a good supervisor should be doing'. But having experienced some of the casual Cambridge teaching of that time—with essays read out in the supervisions to inattentive dons—'it was a revelation'.[16]

In 1965 Zara was appointed a Fellow of New Hall, an all-women's college, which had recently moved into its new building on Huntingdon Road, to the northwest of Cambridge, and the Steiners settled in a big house in Barrow Road, on the opposite side of the city. For thirty years she taught the modern history papers, pairing at New Hall with two medievalists: Helen Clover, a founding fellow, and then Christine Carpenter, who became a close friend. Zara was a supportive teacher but tough with those she considered idle. When George was appointed to the chair of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva in 1974—a post he held for twenty years—Zara was able to arrange with New Hall to take most Lent Terms off, allowing her to be in Geneva from January to April. This made her less of a presence in college business but, just before her retirement, she was the natural choice to serve as Acting President during an interregnum year 1995–6.

Zara's greatest pleasures as a teacher were derived from her graduate students—many of whom became almost part of the family—and on whom she left an indelible impression. Professor Phillips O'Brien still recalls what happened when he contacted her out of the blue thirty years ago. A young American visiting London after college, uncertain about whether to do a PhD or go to law school, he suddenly decided to write a letter 'to the historian whose books on diplomatic history had most impressed me – Zara Steiner'. Much to his surprise, he received a handwritten reply a few days later inviting him to come and discuss his ideas about the First World War. 'Whatever motivated Zara to respond so graciously and positively still amazes me to this date.' The visit to Cambridge, however, did not start out well. He got lost a couple of times walking from the station to New Hall:

> I arrived at Zara's office looking distinctly dishevelled and worried that she would take one look at me and send me away instantly. Instead she smiled her wonderful, crooked smile, offered me a cup of tea and said in her unexpectedly strong New York

[15] Steiner, 'Beyond the Foreign Office papers', 550.
[16] Email from Professor Peter Clarke FBA, 11 August 2020.

> accent, 'you look like you've walked from Boston!' And that was that. An hour later, she had completely corrected all of my ideas on the impact of the First World War [but] took my breath away by telling me, as I was preparing to leave, that I should definitely apply and put her down as someone willing to supervise my PhD. It was the single most impactful meeting of my professional life, and it is hard to imagine it happening with any other major historian of her generation.[17]

Dr Stephanie Salzmann recalls coming to Cambridge in the autumn of 1989:

> I believe I was only the second German, and the first female student Zara Steiner had accepted to supervise for an MPhil thesis. I was rather nervous when I entered her New Hall office for the first encounter. How would she, the Jewish-American historian, receive me, the German student? I still see her, sitting in her armchair, surrounded by books, piles on the floor, papers everywhere. I see her warm eyes, her smile . . . Many years later she told me that for her it had been quite a step to accept a German student, but that the interest in my topic [Soviet–German relations in the 1920s] outweighed her reservations.

Zara was then working intensively on the interwar years. She and Stephanie often got into detailed discussions about particular archival documents. 'Her immense knowledge and overview always left me stunned . . . Several times she handed me the key to her office for the week-end: "Go and have a look at the documents in the second drawer, they are important for you."' This blossomed into a two-way relationship of fellow researchers, talking together as equals. 'When she told me that, in the light of my research, she needed to rewrite a chapter of her book, I felt as if I had received a knighthood.' Being supervised by Zara gave Stephanie self-confidence. 'She never displayed any doubt that I would succeed in my work.' Zara's message to all her students—particularly young women—was 'You can do it!'[18]

Zara was also shrewdly sensitive when dealing with those inevitable moments of existential crisis in the doctoral saga. Professor Neville Wylie experienced his 'hitting-the-wall' experience after completing most of the research for his PhD on Britain's Second World War blockade of Switzerland. Casually browsing in a Bern bookshop, he discovered a new and frankly excellent monograph on precisely that subject:

> I was devastated. Fortunately, Zara was not. Over the next few months, she not only pulled me together but tutored me in a fearless, more expansive view of the past. She insisted this was a great stroke of luck. Someone else had done the heavy lifting on the blockade, so I could write a study that went beyond import quotas and black lists, and set Anglo-Swiss relations into a context that considered the full panoply of cultural, economic, strategic, political and historical influences. I should write about spies,

[17] Email from Professor Phillips O'Brien, 6 September 2020.
[18] Email from Dr Stephanie Salzmann, 7 September 2020.

> smugglers and saboteurs, bankers, heirless assets, and humanitarians—and the allure of the Alps to the English elite.

Not only did this resolve Neville Wylie's PhD crisis, it gave him 'the confidence to go beyond our discipline and explore the intersections between history, IR and international humanitarian law'. In short, her response to that SOS from Bern pushed him towards a much richer conception of international history.[19]

The flowering of a historian

There is not space to discuss in detail all of Zara Steiner's writings. But brief mention should be made of *The Times Survey of Foreign Ministries of the World* which appeared under her editorship in 1982. This developed from work she had done at Princeton in the 1950s about recent American governmental reforms, which amalgamated State Department staff and the diplomatic service.[20] In tandem with her doctoral research on the Foreign Office, this engendered a lasting interest in diplomatic practices. The *Times Survey* covered twenty-four different countries, with individual chapters authored by a truly global cast. Although consuming, like all editorial projects, an inordinate amount of time, it widened Zara's international reputation and also underlined for her the value of comparative history.[21]

The scholarship for which Zara Steiner will be best remembered is her two-volume contribution to the Oxford History of Modern Europe. In 1976 she was invited by Alan Bullock to write the successor volume to A. J. P. Taylor's classic, *The Struggle for Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918*. This was a daunting task—the canvas would be vast, and Zara did not have George's linguistic virtuosity or Taylor's talent for epigrammatic mischief—but the challenge was intoxicating. She said yes. OUP's brief was 1919–45 in a single volume, for which Zara requested ten years.

Lord Bullock kept urging her on. 'I really want this to be published before I die', he would say—but it wasn't. In a dénouement familiar to many scholars, one volume became two and ten years turned into thirty. *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* finally appeared in 2005, and *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933–1939* in 2011. It was through her persistence, with the support of Bullock and his successor Sir William Deakin, that OUP eventually accepted a two-volume work—though Zara stopped the detailed

[19] Email from Professor Neville Wylie, 6 Sept. 2020.

[20] Z. Steiner, *The State Department and the Foreign Service* (Princeton, 1958); Z. Steiner, *Present Problems of the Foreign Service* (Princeton, 1961).

[21] Z. S. Steiner, *The Times Survey of Foreign Ministries of the World* (London, 1982).

narrative in 1939 with the coming of war in Europe, rather than the globalisation of the conflict in 1941, let alone the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945. Even so, *The Lights That Failed* ran to 950 pages, and *The Triumph of the Dark* amounted to a massive 1,238 pages, with over a hundred of them devoted to the index alone.

The gargantuan scale of the whole work partly reflected the complexity of the project: to write the international history of a whole continent that was also constantly buffeted by global forces, as well as taking seriously how national economies were transformed by the earthquake of 1914–18 and the subsequent aftershocks, especially the Slump and Depression. Zara also grappled with issues such as race and gender, intelligence and memory, that were opening up the historical discipline, and with the constant challenges of balancing narrative and analysis. As usual, work on the book was squeezed in amid a heavy teaching load of both undergraduate and graduates, not to mention the constant needs of her remarkable but demanding husband. Zara's perfectionism was also a mixed blessing. Assiduous as ever in her research, she kept delaying the writing of this or that chapter a little longer in order to absorb the latest *thèse d'état* from Paris or yet another German *Habil.* When the whole draft was finished, it amounted to nearly a million words. A large amount of cutting and shaping was required, which sometimes left her disheartened. Here, graduate students—present and past—provided essential morale boosts, IT consultancy and footnote chasing.

On one level, the volumes provide superb overviews of phases and topics—for example a masterly sixty-page distillation of post-1918 reconstruction in Eastern and Central Europe, or an acute analysis of disarmament negotiations in the early 1930s (French security versus German revisionism). Each chapter, complete with its own guide to further reading, can be read with profit by scholars and students alike. But in tandem the two books also trace a vast narrative arc, and one that verges on classical tragedy. Zara did justice to the 1920s as a time of hope and promise—rather than treating it as just part of a dark valley between two world wars, as suggested by the 'Thirty Years War' thesis. She particularly highlighted the positive signs in 1919 and again in 1924–5 (the Dawes Plan and Locarno) and, as counterpoint, also brought out starkly the economic and political impact of the Depression in dimming some of those hopeful lights during what she called the 'hinge years' of 1929–33. And yet Europe's descent into the abyss was not inevitable. Rejecting economic determinism, she demonstrated how the road to war was paved with human choices, risks and misjudgements as the 1930s went on—most of all in the person of that supremely devilish gambler, Adolf Hitler.

The work earned her belated election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2007, somewhat salving her pain at never (just like George) being appointed to a permanent Faculty position at Cambridge. At New Hall there was spontaneous delight at news of the FBA, and the College—not exactly rolling in riches—spared no expense on a celebratory dinner. The books won praise from a wide range of reviewers. Even the

criticisms dealt more with omission than commission. On *The Lights That Failed* Paul Schroeder, the dean of American international historians, praised ‘a magisterial narrative history, thorough, comprehensive, wide-ranging, well-organized, cautious, balanced in judgement, objective in tone’. But he also raised questions about some lights that ‘needed to be lit but never were’—in particular the lack of constructive and sustained attention paid by British and French statesmen to the future of Eastern Europe after the collapse of the old empires in 1918. ‘Thus, the reconstruction of Europe during the 1920s was all on the front, Western, side of the building; the rear remained open to every blast of the prevailing winds’ and this, he argued, the book did not take sufficiently seriously. In 2014 Stefan Link offered a similar judgement on *The Triumph of the Dark*, finding it ‘magisterial in design, meticulous in execution’ and ‘felicitous’ in presentation—yet also ‘curiously old-fashioned in its inclinations’. He noted that the only time ‘she pauses her narrative to reflect at length’ was on the counterfactual question of whether Britain and France should have gone to war in September 1938 rather than a year later—indicative for him of the essentially Western European focus of the work. ‘Perhaps one day,’ he concluded, ‘a political history of Europe in the 1930s will be written from the vantage point of, say, Budapest or even Istanbul, rather than London or Paris. In the meantime, Steiner’s volume will be the authoritative reference.’[22]

Yet, as Link implied, such a book could not have been written by a historian rooted by personality and training in ‘the German question’ as seen from across the Channel. That said, the extent to which Zara had stretched beyond the ‘Foreign Office view’ that had defined her entry into the profession was truly impressive. *The Triumph of the Dark* gained this accolade by an eminent historian and FBA rooted in social history, Richard J. Evans:

> Zara Steiner has written a masterly sequel to *The Lights That Failed*, her equally masterful study of international relations from the end of World War I up to the Nazi seizure of power. Her two-volume account will stand the test of time. It is as impressive in its breadth as it is in its depth, covering economic developments and relations, arms production, diplomatic negotiations, politics, and war with equal authority. Steiner’s command of the scholarly literature and documentation in several languages is little short of awe-inspiring. Her book is brilliantly written, full of pungent judgments, arresting phrases and sarcastic asides, and conveys often complicated sequences of events with limpid clarity.[23]

Richard’s review was one that gave her particular pleasure.

[22] P. W. Schroeder, ‘The lights that failed – and those never lit’, *International History Review*, 28 (2006), 119–26; S. J. Link, review, *Journal of Modern History*, 86 (2014), 425–7.
[23] R. J. Evans, ‘The mistakes,’ *The New Republic*, 1 September 2011.

Twilight

Zara's last years, as for many senior scholars, was a time of frustration. Her mind was still full of ideas and projects, but strength and stamina were on the wane. Her 80th birthday had been celebrated with a warm, convivial and well-attended dinner at New Hall, but she made clear that she wanted nothing of the sort when she turned 90 in 2018. Although always managing to sparkle for visitors to Barrow Road, Zara intimated that daily living had become a struggle and she was ready to go. After considerable effort, she managed to complete a couple of articles that had preyed on her mind for years—one of them a comparison of attitudes to war in Britain in 1914 and 1939, the other a charming mix of memoir and reflection about her odyssey as an international historian.[24] In these and other endeavours, she was again much helped by former students, especially Dr Barbara Metzger and Dr Felicitas von Peter. Professor Thomas Otte of the University of East Anglia, who brought out his own major study of July 1914 for the centenary, provided great intellectual companionship and became her literary executor. The final year was darkened by worries about her health and that of George, who had taken to his bed. Ten days after him, she passed away on 13 February 2020.

Zara Steiner was in many ways a product of the post-war era—an American settled in Britain who moved easily to and fro across the Atlantic and who believed in the steady advance of Enlightenment rationality. She was also a woman who battled tenaciously against the tyrannies, both deliberate and unthinking, of a male-shaped profession. Generations of undergraduates and doctoral students valued her as a mentor who cared for them as people and not simply writers. Young women, in particular, were inspired by her brisk 'You can do it'—as she had been uplifted by the likes of Mary Leys and Lillian Penson. But as the years lengthened, Zara and George became ever more conscious of both their identity and their vulnerability as Jews. The upsurge of populist nationalism in the world of Trump, Putin, Orbán and Johnson was deeply unsettling. And the revival of aggressive anti-Semitism seemed like an existential threat—for the second time in their lives.

Zara Steiner's two great valedictory volumes therefore stand as monument and also as warning. In her final years she sensed that the lights were beginning to fail. Her hope was that this did not presage another triumph of the dark.

[24] Z. Steiner, 'Beyond the Foreign Office Papers', cited in note 5; Z. Steiner, 'Views of war, 1914 and 1939: second thoughts', in T. G. Otte (ed.), *British World Policy and the Projection of Global Power, c. 1830–1960* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 174–200.

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