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**Author's Response to** Joshua Shiffrin. Review of **Anthony D'Agostino, *The Rise of Global Powers: International Politics in the Era of the World Wars.*** H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2012. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35703>

Commissioned by **Seth Offenbach**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/D'Agostino-BookReview-Response.pdf>

Response by **Anthony D'Agostino**, San Francisco State University

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“History and Theory on the World Wars”

It is good to know that Joshua Shiffrin sees my *The Rise of Global Powers: International Politics in the Era of the World Wars* as an influential pointer for historians and theorists of international relations.<sup>1</sup> Shiffrin is mainly interested in IR theory and how the ideas in the book relate to those of the scholars listed in his notes, from Hans Morgenthau, Inis Claude, and Kenneth Waltz to John Mearsheimer, Steven Van Evera, Jack Snyder, Robert Jervis, and many others. I am encouraged by the idea that a conversation between history and theory continues to exist and, in the interest of furthering it in a small way, I would like to offer some notes of my own on the matters that Shiffrin raises.

I am thinking about a whole series of large and small points, but the main ones are as follows: 1) the security dilemma as a way of understanding the origins of World War One, 2) the differences between the origins of the two world wars, and 3) the role of ideas in world politics. In brief, I would suggest that the security dilemma move over and at least share the stage with the scramble for the world in the era of the world wars as described in *The Rise of Global Powers*. The scramble was a continuation of the scrambles of the nineteenth century and reached a climax in a struggle for world power status, that is, something beyond that of a merely continental great power and approximating that of the world power of the naval hegemon, Britain. I attribute the appeasement of Japan, Italy, and Germany that followed in the interwar period not merely to a sensible fear of war and an obvious premonition that it would mean the ruin of European world status to the benefit of the Yankees and the Bolsheviks. I prefer to stress the differing national interests of those who ended up dropping appeasement and fighting fascism. I do not consider this turn the mechanistic response of a system of balance of power so much as a victory for the foreign policy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. I treat the great scramble as having ended with the defeat of fascism and I regard the bipolar relationship of the Cold War in different terms, not of pure rivalry but of an

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<sup>1</sup> For his July 2012 review of my book, see <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-diplo&month=1207&week=b&msg=7L6c9lAT9vR2QpQq6lsJA&user=&pw=>

alternance between confrontation and Rooseveltian détente. One can think of the latter as a residue of the previous anti-fascist coalition. Rather than chastise the successful actors for their blunders, I put more stress on the good fortune of the final decisions, the ugliness of the counterfactual possibilities, and the role of ideas in the challenges these actors faced and in their responses. The focus throughout is on the complexities and mysteries of alignment and what Blaise Pascal would have called its radical contingency.

As for the origins of the Great War, it seems to me that world politics and the scramble offer a better perspective than, for example, AJP Taylor's *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*.<sup>2</sup> Taylor emphasized the similarity of the origins of the world wars and referred to a "war by timetable" in 1914. To be sure, the security dilemma helps to illuminate the July crisis of 1914, but it presupposes a rigid series of alliance commitments. This prompts the question: How did the alignment take shape? The usual answer of historians used to be to go back to the maneuvers of the Bismarckian Peace, but I argue for the importance of the non-European setting of the origins of the Triple Entente. It arose out of Britain's balancing action against the Far Eastern Triplice at the end of the Sino-Japanese war of 1895. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance to prepare the Russo-Japanese war (in order to balance Russia) was followed by a British entente with France to localize that war. This started the diplomatic revolution that was to bring Britain to the Franco-Russian Alliance, for additional reasons outlined in the book. You could say that the Great War began in the Far East, an argument that *The Rise of Global Powers* takes up. Shiffrinson suggests that, against Waltz and Paul Schroeder, I regard balancing as a last resort. To be sure, the Triple Entente was not mechanistically inevitable. The British conception of national interest was affected by the Salisbury tradition of seeing Britain as a silent partner to the Triple Alliance. This is shown in Lord Sanderson's reply to Eyre Crowe's memorandum of 1908. Before balancing Russia, Britain tried negotiation. Lord Salisbury offered a vast division of the world island with Russia, and then Germany was sought out to contain Russia. When these alternatives failed, Japan loomed as a potential ally, then France. The tortuous path that led from balancing Russia in the Far East to balancing Germany by the Triple Entente was not at all mechanistic, although the events form a logical chain. In its own way it was a product of the great scramble.

Shiffrinson asks why it was that alliances were "tight and inflexible in 1914" and "weak and lackadaisical" before 1939? Let us consider these assumptions. Britain's commitment in 1914 to the Franco-Russian Alliance was in fact seriously doubted by the Germans who might have acted differently if they assumed it to be tight and inflexible. In 1912 Britain had sent some cruisers to aid the international force restraining the attempts of Serbia and Montenegro to annex ports on the Adriatic. It looked as if Britain had abandoned the Franco-Russian Alliance and returned to the Salisbury tradition and the Triple Alliance. In 1914 this caused the Germans to hope that Britain might not come to the aid of the Triple Entente. Indeed, if it had not, Germany might have won the war. And appeasement was not weak and lackadaisical. No doubt the appeasers had overlearned the presumed lesson of the security dilemma of 1914, as

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<sup>2</sup> AJP Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, Oxford University Press, 1954

Robert Jervis has noted.<sup>3</sup> They certainly feared another catastrophic war. Yet appeasement was more than that, a hopeful wager on the possibility of living with a German Central Europe in a world divided into economic blocs, behind a deterrent force of strategic bombers. It was a strategic line in defense of the national interest of Britain and the Empire. Neville Chamberlain had bought the case of Prince Konoye for the just cause of the Have-Not powers. In 1937 Lord Halifax had green-lighted the German annexation of Austria, the Sudetenland, and the Corridor. Some realist theory gets too caught up with the 'blunders' of not fighting earlier and the presumed folly of 'underbalancing.' Rather than asking why the Nazis were not stopped sooner, we should be asking why they were opposed at all. Why fight the war over the Corridor after green-lighting it in 1937? There are a number of reasons enumerated in the book. But most prominent among these is that appeasement was sunk by a foreign policy and a national interest outside Europe, that of the U.S., as conceived and pursued by Roosevelt.

Lest these notes go on too long let me conclude them by considering Shiffrinson's main question: what is the reason for the "imperious necessity" that Prince Gorchakov noted in the national expansion of the powers? As a rule, historians would not presume to pass on this existential question; they are studying unique events rather than recurrent phenomena like the procession of the equinoxes. Why does a state desire more power than it needs? Why does one desire more friends or money than one might need? Why are all states not equally aggressive? I will not attempt to catalogue an answer beyond a critical note on Waltz's "third image," trope,<sup>4</sup> the system of states, as the current answer of choice. Historians of the interwar period tend, for good reason, to doubt the efficacy of the realist model of rational actors reacting to the dictates of an international system. They usually cite the various passions of the mind that seemed to animate so many decisions in this period. National interest can describe a straightforward worry about security but, as well as need, there is also desire. Even so, historians should grant that study of the era of the world wars is not only, not even primarily, the study of irrational and suicidal impulses. They too easily resort to citing these and the various 'blunders.' Hitler made a calculated gamble on war (ultimately war against Russia), "with its attendant risks." In attacking Pearl Harbor, Japan made a calculated wager on the outcome of the battle of Moscow. If Russia had fallen they would have got their way. Even the most passionate minds, when they are guiding the foreign policy of a great state, must pursue their ends as rational actors. Were Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, and Roosevelt driven by ideology or national interest? In their minds there was no conflict. This should remind us that when we speak about a balance of power we are also necessarily speaking about a balance of ideas.

Moreover, national interest has to be considered in terms of alternate 'pictures' of an international system. For the appeasers it was the European great power 'picture.' Preventing war with the fascists was the last attempt to preserve a system of European

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, "Political Science Perspectives," in Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo (eds.) *The Origins of World War Two: the Debate Continues* (Basingstoke, 2003), 220.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York and London, 1962), chs. 6 and 7.

supremacy in the world. The national interest of the United States was, on the other hand, only intelligible in a global context. So the era of the world wars, which began with the dawn of world politics at the turn of the twentieth century, finally sorted out the question of which great powers would become world powers and eventually superpowers. The specific lessons of that time have lost none of their relevance to the discussion between history and theory.

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