
Article:
Richardson, A (2020) Public Opinion and Twentieth-Century Diplomacy: A Global Perspective by Daniel Hucker, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, viii + 224 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN: 9781472524881. Diplomacy & Statecraft, 31 (4). pp. 811-812. ISSN: 0959-2296

https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2020.1842053

Public Opinion and Twentieth-Century Diplomacy: A Global Perspective, by Daniel Hucker, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, pp. viii + 224, £85 (hardback), ISBN: 9781472524881

In an age when 'the will of the people' has become a persistent soundbite deployed by decision-makers, it seems particularly timely that Daniel Hucker's latest work focuses on the role and impact of public opinion on twentieth century diplomacy. Often overlooked by international historians, the changing technological, media, and political world of the twentieth-century made public opinion an increasingly important factor in the realm of foreign affairs.

It is this underuse of public opinion that Hucker addresses in his work, issuing a rallying cry that as international historians we need to appreciate public opinions 'rightful place as a key determinant of foreign policy' (6). Whilst admitting from the start that there are uncertainties surrounding public opinion and knowing what it actually means, he argues that it did matter to those making decisions. Furthermore, even if conclusions from the evidence are difficult to ascertain, Hucker contends that it should not stop one from trying. Indeed, whilst historians and others have taken to economic, strategic and political factors – to name but a few – in analysing foreign policy, public opinion was as much as a causal factor as any other. Its influence on twentieth century diplomacy, Hucker concludes, was substantial. This line of argument is most evident in the book's excellent introduction. Fulfilling one of the key objectives of the series of which this book forms a part in appealing to an audience of university students, it is here where Hucker sets out powerfully why public opinion is so valuable to the historian and why this work is important. Summarising the literature on and methodology of the discipline, the chapter is set to form an essential part of many reading lists. It echoes one of the main successes of this ambitious work: whilst staunch in its support for the study of public opinion, it does not hide from the limitations that exist in the

discipline. It gives the work an endearing honesty as it accepts and acknowledges its own limitations.

To examine the influence of public opinion on diplomacy, Hucker offers five case studies: the impact of public opinion on British policy at the Paris Peace Conference, French policy and 1930s appeasement, United States policy during the Vietnam War, responses to apartheid, and public attitudes across the EU towards European integration. By taking a chronological structure in analysing these seemingly separate case studies, the book shows the fundamental problems in examining public opinion and its evolution across the century. Indeed, the opening chapter on Britain at the Paris Peace Conference offers a stark opening to the instability of public opinion and alludes to the consequences of the episode for decision-makers as they increasingly looked to gauge and control public opinion. These themes resonate throughout this well researched volume which poses fundamental questions of the field.

The single nation approach taken by the first three case studies works well, focusing on particular aspects of the influence of public opinion to the nations concerned. This enables Hucker to innovatively tackle often well-trodden ground, such as the impact of public opinion on Lloyd George's diplomacy in Paris and the influence of TV as the reason why the United States lost the Vietnam War. However, it is when the work moves on to its multi-nation chapters that it is more varied. The chapter on the anti-apartheid movement is very British in focus – hardly offering the global perspective suggested in the chapter's title. Perhaps this was where the book was overly ambitious as this felt to be a topic too big for one chapter. Moreover, the section on the sporting and cultural boycotts is fundamentally only about sport – wider culture only appears in one paragraph at the end of the section. In contrast, the following chapter on European integration was a lot smoother and held together more coherently. Whilst still western in focus, it examines more nations and had a clearer thesis to

its argument. Yet the fact that Hucker identifies at several points during the book the western-centric nature of the evidence he deploys feeds into the success of the work. He knows this book is a rallying cry and does not hide from the methodological limitations he experienced in its writing.

This is an ambitious and ultimately successful book. It concludes by reminding its audience that the absence of the study of public opinion from much of the discipline is regrettable and, despite the pitfalls and problems inherent with such examination, there are many benefits too. Given this, Hucker is successful in achieving the aim of the book of showing public opinion as ‘an acknowledged but also an underscruntized actor in foreign affairs’ (20).

Adam Richardson
University of Leeds, UK