

# Seven Questions on... The Future of SHAFR

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and Silke Zoller

**Editor's note:** "Seven Questions On..." is a regular feature in *Passport* that will ask scholars in a particular field to respond to seven questions about their field's historiography, key publications, influences, etc. It is designed to introduce the broader SHAFR community to a variety of perspectives for a given field, as well as serving as a literature and pedagogical primer for graduate students and non-specialists. This iteration, however, focuses on the future of the organization. AJ

## 1. What drew you to SHAFR and why (and how long) have you maintained your membership?

**Jason Colby:** I first became aware of SHAFR as an undergraduate at Whitman College, where I studied with David Schmitz. I became a member around 1999-2000, as a first-year graduate student, and I've been a member ever since. I don't think I've ever let it lapse during that time.

**Kelly J. Shannon:** I have been a SHAFR member since 2003, so 20 years! That time went fast. I joined because I was an M.A. student at UConn studying with Frank Costigliola, and Frank told all of his students to join SHAFR. So I did. My first SHAFR experience was the SHAFR reception at the AHA in Washington, D.C. in 2004, and my first SHAFR conference was at NARA College Park in 2005, just after I graduated from UConn and a few months before I started my Ph.D. at Temple with Richard Immerman. I knew nobody except Frank and Richard when I went to the conference, but groups of grad students at other universities and several faculty members quickly introduced themselves and invited me to go to lunch and dinner with them. By the end of that first conference, I knew SHAFR would be a good scholarly home for me. So what drew me to SHAFR was Frank's advice, but what has kept me coming back has been SHAFR's vibrant, friendly, fun community of brilliant scholars. Being able to spend a few days each year talking about foreign relations history, hearing people present their latest research, browsing the book exhibit, catching up with old friends, and meeting new people every June just makes me happy. It's so rare for me to be able to spend time in that kind of focused intellectual environment that I really value the annual conference. SHAFR's support of its members in other ways also contribute to how wonderful this organization is: mentorship; conference travel support for graduate students and international scholars; grants and fellowships, especially for grad students; prizes and awards; meaningful committee service; the Summer Institute (while it lasted); *Diplomatic History*; *Passport*; the list goes on. I think SHAFR is a model of what a scholarly organization should be, and it's a community of genuinely good people. Most of my favorite people are SHAFR members.

**Aileen Teague:** The initiatives supporting grad students and junior scholars drew me to SHAFR, especially the

travel grants, the SHAFR Summer Institute, and the dissertation completion fellowship. Compared with other organizations, SHAFR seemed incredibly well-resourced. SHAFR also provided the perfect size community (not too big, not too small) of like-minded researchers that regularly attend annual meetings.

**Lauren F. Turek:** I joined SHAFR in my second year of graduate school in 2009 because I wanted to be sure that I was receiving *Diplomatic History* so I could at least attempt to familiarize myself with the emerging scholarship in the field; *Passport* meanwhile ended up being a great way to learn more about SHAFR as an organization, as well as to help with the goal of getting to know more about different scholars and their work. I also, of course, was excited to attend the annual meeting. I have maintained my membership since then (and am now a lifetime member) because I enjoy presenting at and attending the annual meeting, receiving SHAFR publications, and volunteering on a range of different committees. In addition, I benefitted greatly from winning the Gelfand-Rappaport Dissertation Fellowship and from participating in one of the Summer Institutes. The former allowed me to conduct research abroad and the latter introduced me to a group of amazing fellow scholars who are now all good friends.

**Carl P. Watts:** I have been a member of SHAFR for almost 20 years. I was introduced to the organization by two good friends from my Ph.D. years at the University of Birmingham—Dr. Andrew Johnstone (University of Leicester) and Dr. Andrew Priest (University of Essex)—who had been to a couple of conferences and suggested that I might benefit from joining SHAFR. It is a good fit for me because quite a few members share my research interests in the international history of British decolonization in Africa, and especially US policy towards southern Africa. Also, I have always been interested in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and I am currently serving my second term on the SHAFR Teaching Committee.

**Silke Zoller:** I've been a member since my first year in graduate school (2013). For me, SHAFR has been a wonderfully supportive professional network. Even as a graduate student, its members made me feel welcome and offered a lot of interested feedback on my work. Some of my best friends and most valued colleagues are members. SHAFR events helped me to prepare my dissertation and job market materials, enabling my academic career.

## 2. What do you think are the two to four most significant issues that should be priorities for SHAFR Council and the membership over the next 5-7 years?

JC: Many possibilities here. I would say continuing to open the organization to young scholars who might not initially

see SHAFR as their natural home, either due to their research interests or personal identities, is a key priority. SHAFR has become vastly more diverse since I first joined, but we need to keep moving in that direction. This means making sure that SHAFR supports and recognizes research on areas beyond traditional interests but of great interest to young scholars and the general public—particularly environmental question and the climate crisis. Indeed, if I had one priority above all, it would be for SHAFR to more fully embrace environmental questions as an essential topic for inquiry.

**KS:** The biggest two issues that we should prioritize are: 1) Careful stewardship of SHAFR's finances and bringing in more donations to the organization so that SHAFR has a healthy long-term financial outlook. I know that Council and SHAFR leadership are already prioritizing this, but it's worth repeating. And 2) Retaining current members and attracting new members. SHAFR lost members during the pandemic, as I'm sure many organizations did, but we have to focus on bringing back those who have left and appealing to new members. We need to do so in a way that ensures that SHAFR is welcoming to all so that we remain a big umbrella for all kinds of scholars working on foreign relations history broadly defined.

**AT:** Maintaining membership and initiatives for junior scholars. Tailoring programs to the changing nature of the academic job market. You all are doing a great job on this so far and I think more on non-academic jobs at future meetings would be useful.

**LT:** Over the next 5-7 years, SHAFR will need to tackle the issue of its financial sustainability for the long term through increased fundraising and the like. The organization cannot do any of the wonderful work that it does if it is not fiscally sound and on a good footing for the future.

Tied in with that, SHAFR needs to continue to work to attract and support graduate student members by expanding its available funding, restoring funding for the summer institutes, and continuing to support students on the academic and non-academic job markets in our field. SHAFR is a wonderfully welcoming organization and we need to ensure that we are continuing to bring in a vibrant group of emerging scholars—and to help ensure that they have a reason to be a part of the organization for hopefully decades to come. Doing more outreach to historians working in government and other non-academic jobs and thinking about how SHAFR can be of value to them deserves serious consideration.

We also need to advocate broadly for more academic hiring in our field. The paucity of listings in history in general is of course concerning, but the available jobs are especially scarce for foreign relations historians. This is also a detriment to undergraduates who are eager to learn about foreign policy, broadly defined; without historians offering courses in our field, they are missing crucial historical context for current events, historical habits of mind, and a deep understanding of the past.

**CW:** I think that financial health must always be the first priority for any professional organization. This is clearly related to maintaining or expanding the membership and effective stewardship of the annual subscriptions paid by members. SHAFR Council minutes indicate that this always receives appropriate attention, and I think that Council is diligent in considering the ways in which it can protect and extend the financial interests of the organization.

**SZ:** For the past decade, history has been weaponized more

and more in political discourse. Politicians, policymakers, pundits, and others drift to the same analogies and events, especially concerning U.S. power, that reinforce their existing positions. More than ever, historians need to participate in the public discourse about the events we study. If we do not speak up, simplified, misleading historical narratives will only further serve narrow political interests.

Meanwhile, tenure-track jobs continue to decline as academic institutions rely on adjuncts and limited-time positions to teach necessary courses. These positions do not offer job security or the chance to sustainably plan a future. SHAFR members would benefit from more of a focus on job preparation, but also alternative career paths and outreach opportunities to such paths.

**3. What would you do if you had control over an annual \$50,000 budget to spend on SHAFR-related activities? For example, would you fund two dissertation completion fellowships? Would you revive the Summer Institute program? Do you have another brilliant idea?**

**JC:** I wish I had a brilliant idea. I do love the extensive resources SHAFR has committed to supporting and recognizing young scholars, so I suppose I would encourage more in that area, if the resources are available.

**KS:** I would love to bring back the Summer Institute. I participated in one as a grad student, and I got a lot out of it. A lot of us who attended that year formed a close cohort and are still in touch with one another, sharing ideas and inviting one another to speak, etc. Then I was a convener at the last ever Summer Institute in 2022 in New Orleans, and I got to see it from the other side. The Summer Institute provides a really unique opportunity for grad students and junior scholars in our field, so I would prioritize bringing it back. But barring that, I might also want to spend money on teaming up with American University's Bridging the Gap project, which aims to connect scholars with the policy world. I attended their International Policy Summer Institute (IPSI) in summer 2021—which was unfortunately virtual due to Covid—and it was a fantastic experience. It trained us scholars in how to connect with and speak to policymakers, think tanks, journalists, and the public. I was one of only two historians in my cohort; the rest were political scientists. I think SHAFR participating in something like that would go a long way toward getting our scholarship out into the policy world, which I think is much-needed, and it would also be useful for our members who may wish to work in government, think tanks, or other policy-relevant positions outside academia. Last but not least (and I know I probably don't have any money left from my \$50,000 at this point), I would be interested in creating a fund for unemployed/precariously employed SHAFR members to help cover their membership dues and conference participation. Having a fund so that temporary financial difficulties don't keep members from participating in SHAFR would be helpful.

**AT:** The SHAFR Summer Institute would be at the top of my list. I think it could also be useful to have a postdoctoral fellowship alongside the dissertation completion fellowship. This postdoc might help in some of the administrative responsibilities of the organization and could alleviate some of the responsibilities of the Executive Director.

**LT:** Given the loss of fellowships for graduate students in the humanities from the major funders (the Mellon, etc.), I would definitely want to find ways to fund graduate students, in particular through additional travel and language fellowships. Grad students must have funding

at the front end of their projects to get them off the ground and ensure they will be able to write the strongest dissertations possible. Reviving the Summer Institutes would also be fantastic, as the benefits of that program for networking, refining dissertation/book chapters, and forging friendships cannot be overstated.

**CW:** The SHAFR Summer Institute program has undoubtedly been a worthwhile enterprise. It has covered a number of thematic interests that are of interest to SHAFR members, including national security, nuclear weapons, and the intersection between domestic politics and foreign policy. However, as a member of the Teaching Committee I would naturally wish to see SHAFR allocate more resources to teaching-focused initiatives. SHAFR is obviously a vibrant research community, but I think that teaching is somewhat sidelined and this should be addressed.

The Teaching Committee has a mission to engage “national and international educators in conversation about the value of teaching and learning the history of American foreign relations.” In my opinion we need to go beyond this to discuss effective teaching of American foreign relations. Beginning scholars have to demonstrate the efficacy of their teaching practice as well as the significance of their research if they are to be competitive in their job search. I think we could establish regular teaching workshops to give them the tools for that purpose. The Teaching Committee was gaining some traction in 2018-19 but I think that the pandemic resulted in a loss of momentum. I would like to see SHAFR give greater encouragement and more resources to establish a lasting focus on effective teaching and learning in the field of American foreign relations.

**SZ:** My strongest SHAFR experiences have been ones in which a number of other scholars took the time to read my research and gave sustained feedback. The Summer Institute is an excellent opportunity for this type of collaboration.

In addition, I personally know many graduate students and scholars based outside of North America who engage with its themes and would love to share their work with the organization. By sponsoring more travel grants, SHAFR could enable the presence of valuable global research and viewpoints that complement and strengthen members’ existing interests.

#### **4. What would you suggest that SHAFR should do to expand its membership, its public profile, and its annual conference attendance?**

**JC:** I think I offered most of my thoughts on this in question #2. I’m a big fan of in-person conferences, and I’d rather not see SHAFR dilute its events with a hybrid approach. It would be terrific to see more international students and scholars attend, but that would like require the level of financial support that SHAFR can’t provide.

**KS:** To expand our membership, we need to be better at outreach—to graduate programs, scholars who do SHAFR-relevant work but who haven’t considered joining or presenting at our conference, independent scholars, think tanks, people in foreign relations-related non-academic jobs, etc. That might range from individual members acting as SHAFR ambassadors by inviting specific people to join to advertising campaigns targeting graduate programs, government agencies, think tanks, and perhaps ads in *AHA* publications. This relates to expanding our public profile. We need a more robust social media presence that highlights our organization and the work of our members, a unified website (having two sites to navigate right now isn’t

ideal—[shafir.org](http://shafir.org) and Member Clicks), and again a targeted outreach campaign that gets across how important SHAFR and our work is so that we not only attract new members, but also our work gets public notice. Maybe when our members write op-eds and other public-facing pieces, we can also include a mention of SHAFR in our short author bios somehow? It may also be useful to have a page on our website where we aggregate our work—maybe an experts directory or something like that so that members can input our publications, areas of expertise, availability for speaking engagements, etc. so that media outlets and others looking for experts in our field can go there and see all of the fantastic scholars who make up our organization in one place. In terms of conference attendance, I’m pretty happy with our typical conference numbers. SHAFR is big enough that there are a lot of interesting panels and events to choose from, but small enough to be collegial and welcoming. Having 300-500 people in non-D.C. years and 500+ people in D.C. years is the perfect size, which is I think our typical conference attendance.

**AT:** I am not sure.

**LT:** SHAFR should expand existing connections with historians working in related non-academic fields, including those in federal, state, and local governments, museums (including but not limited to the National Museum of American Diplomacy), media, secondary education, think tanks and NGOs, and the like. For example, experts within SHAFR might be able to collaborate with education professionals and curators at museums to develop opportunities for teachers to earn continuing education credits in topics related to U.S. foreign relations history, which would have the benefit of bringing more knowledge of diplomatic history to schools (within the confines of state education standards of course).

**CW:** Following on from my comments in relation to question 3, I think that SHAFR might be able to expand its membership if it were to make a conscious effort to present itself as an organization that is concerned with teaching as well as scholarship. This would open up SHAFR to SoTL organizations and faculty in community colleges for whom archival scholarship might be seen as a luxury that they cannot afford. It is also possible that SHAFR might be able to grow by establishing joint memberships with organizations where there is a crossover of interests, such as the American Political Science Association, the International Studies Association, and the Society for Military History. SHAFR might consider how to enhance its public profile by discussing outreach with energetic and media-savvy scholars like Christopher McKnight Nichols at Ohio State and Hal Brands at Johns Hopkins.

**SZ:** The travel grants I mentioned above would be a valuable way to enable truly international discourses between scholars at the SHAFR conference.

I am glad to see SHAFR involved in more advocacy than it has been in the past.

#### **5. Where would you like to see a future SHAFR conference held? What kinds of social events, keynote topics, and local attractions would make it more likely that you would attend? Do you think that SHAFR’s every other year in Washington, D.C. tradition should continue? Why or why not?**

**JC:** I don’t have much to suggest here. I think SHAFR does a superb job with its conference locations. I’m excited to have the next meeting in Toronto, which is great for Canadian-based scholars like myself, but I wouldn’t change

the tradition of Washington D.C. every year—it is a major reason those meetings get such great attention.

As for the social events, SHAFR has been terrific at this throughout my time in the organization. The dinner cruise on the Potomac was a blast.

**KS:** I absolutely think that SHAFR's every other year in Washington, D.C. tradition should continue (and I'm not just saying this because I recently moved to the D.C. area). From what I understand, the D.C. conferences are usually larger than the non-D.C. ones, so there's an obvious draw. A lot of SHAFR conference attendees use the opportunity to visit the archives in the D.C. area when they attend the D.C. conference. NARA College Park, the Library of Congress, Georgetown—a lot of the important archives in our field are in the area. There's also a lot to do in terms of social events and cool places to go for dinner, museums, etc. D.C.'s location and three area airports make it convenient for our European members. For U.S.-based members on the Eastern seaboard, it's easy to get to by car, train, or a short flight. Plus, the Renaissance (our usual hotel) loves us because we spend so much money at their bar! Meeting in the District also offers the ability for SHAFR contingents to meet with lawmakers or policymakers if they so choose, or go to the Supreme Court to await an important ruling (since we meet in June), and it makes it easier to get current and former policymakers to be keynote speakers for us. Washington, D.C. is important for a lot of our research, and I think it makes sense that it's a regular conference location. I'd even be happy if we did conferences in D.C. more often—say two years in a row and then every third year we go somewhere else.

I almost always go to SHAFR, so the non-D.C. locations, attractions, keynote topics, etc. don't really matter that much to me, as long as the locations are easy to get to (nearby airports are key), not terribly expensive, and not ridiculously hot in June (sorry, New Orleans). I think we should do more conferences West of the Mississippi—Colorado would be nice, or Stanford, Seattle, the Twin Cities, or Chicago. I'd be interested in going to the UK, as well, especially since we have a lot of members in the UK.

No matter the location, I think we should go back to our regular third week of June conference dates. The conference was mid-June the past two years, and that was hard for our colleagues on the trimester system (especially those in California—this past year's conference coincided with their graduation ceremonies). Going back to the third week of June is not only our historically scheduled week (at least during my 20 years of membership)—always knowing what week SHAFR will take place is really helpful for planning purposes—but it also works better for our trimester system colleagues.

For social events, I'm really up for anything as long as there's good food and a chance to mingle. Probably my favorite social event so far was the BBQ in Kansas.

**AT:** Any university in Texas! I would like to see everyone come out to Texas A&M. It's a bit remote but inexpensive and we have a great community of diplomatic historians in College Station, as well as the Bush 41 Library.

**LT:** I appreciate having SHAFR in DC every other year, as I like being able to travel back east and to take advantage of archives in the DC area during my trip. I am open to any future locations for the annual meeting, provided there are ample dining options nearby (specifically vegetarian/vegan dining options) and am looking forward to going on the upcoming trip to Toronto.

**CW:** I have always enjoyed attending the conference venue in Arlington and hope that SHAFR will continue to hold its annual meeting there every other year. It is easier for international scholars to attend when the conference is held there or in another city on the East Coast. Obviously, when the conference is held in the DC area SHAFR members can stay on for research in the Library of Congress or National Archives and can take advantage of the many cultural opportunities in the capital. I like visiting other cities, but I much prefer it when the conference venue is in a downtown area hotel such as Lexington in 2014 and Philadelphia in 2018. I do not like having to catch buses between downtown hotels and campus venues like San Diego in 2016 and New Orleans in 2022, although I recognize that it makes available more affordable accommodation options on campus. I typically do not attend social events or keynotes and prefer to socialize with my friends and colleagues on the sidelines of the conference.

**SZ:** The Washington, D.C., conferences tend to draw a significant crowd of scholars. I have found that these conferences enable me to network and meet friends and colleagues very effectively. The proximity to D.C. archives and institutions also eases the burden of explaining to departments and funding agencies why and how this conference trip will be useful.

Airplane tickets are the single largest expense that I have had in attending SHAFR conferences. Especially when I was a graduate student, having a conference venue near a substantial airport with a range of affordable flights was a significant boon.

## **6. How can we make SHAFR more international—both in scholarship and membership?**

**JC:** This might be worth a roundtable, but there are several issues here. The first is cost—travel is quite expensive now, which deters many international scholars. The second is that, despite its evolution over the years, SHAFR still has a US-centric view of international relations that makes it appear less inclusive than it actually is.

I would suggest that the program committee emphasize formation of a roundtable or two that would include prominent US-based scholars as well scholars from outside the US to model a bit of dialogue on these questions.

**KS:** I think SHAFR has done a good job of attracting members based in Europe, especially the UK, and recent initiatives like designating a seat on Council for a member from a non-U.S. institution and conference travel funds for international scholars are a step in the right direction. Again, outreach so that scholars working on SHAFR-relevant scholarship who aren't based in the U.S. know about SHAFR and see it as a potential scholarly home would be useful. And while I think SHAFR shouldn't totally abandon the fact that we're an organization focused on American foreign relations, doing more to attract and highlight papers that don't center on Washington, D.C. or Europe at our annual conference would help widen our scope. As much as our field has internationalized in recent years, we still have relatively few panels on Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. That said, I think it will be difficult to be a truly global organization in terms of logistics, but continuing internationalization is beneficial.

**AT:** I am not sure.

**LT:** Hosting more regular mini-conferences, summer institutes, or symposia abroad, with options for virtual attendance, would be one option. We could also consider a

virtual symposia series that features talks by international scholars. That would give U.S. members the chance to learn from scholars working on U.S. foreign relations in other countries and would create opportunities for international collaboration.

**CW:** In terms of scholarship there is an argument to be made that in straying too far beyond US foreign relations as an organizing principle SHAFR might lose some of its coherence. I do not think the same is true with regard to membership and it would certainly be helpful from the perspective of diversity, equity, and inclusion if SHAFR could incentivize membership and conference attendance from international scholars, especially those who are from the Global South. SHAFR might consider allocating funds to subsidize conference attendance for this purpose.

**SZ:** See my suggestions for questions 3 and 4.

Often, language barriers provide substantial burdens to historians seeking truly international archival research. SHAFR's Michael J. Hogan Foreign Language Fellowships are an invaluable tool to promote more multilingual and international research.

### **7. Do you have any other suggestions for SHAFR's leadership to strengthen or improve the organization?**

**JC:** SHAFR has always been my favourite scholarly organization, and I'm proud of how it has changed over the years. As I became more interested in international environmental questions, I have felt, perhaps incorrectly, that few SHAFR members are interested in such topics, and so I drifted away for a number of years. I guess I would reiterate that I'd love to see SHAFR prioritize environmental questions more—which shouldn't be hard, as everyone in the world is being confronted with the climate crisis.

**KS:** We live in an increasingly polarized world in which people are dividing into camps based on political ideology—both in the United States and in many countries around the world. Pretty much everything is politicized, and I think that poses some dangers for SHAFR. I think it's important that SHAFR be careful going forward to make sure that we remain open and welcome to all and that we don't end up inadvertently making SHAFR a political or ideological organization rather than a scholarly one. This is not a criticism of SHAFR; it's just a concern about how the wider context in which we operate may make things difficult for us to navigate as an organization. Right now, we have a wide membership that is diverse in so many ways, and we are able to disagree with one another—

sometimes passionately—and still work together and see ourselves as belonging to one scholarly community. Being able to remain a diverse organization in which we can have productive and collegial conversations across difference will be increasingly challenging given the state of the world (and given increasing restrictions on academic freedom in many of the places where our members work), but I think it is necessary for our field, our members, and the long-term health of the organization.

Another issue is that SHAFR's administration has become infinitely more complex, even just in the two decades since I joined, as SHAFR has grown and as the world we operate in has become more complicated. I saw this up close when I served on Council. The SHAFR President and Executive Director have to deal with way more issues in many more areas than in the past (finances, legal issues, digital communications, advocacy statements, managing the demands of a growing membership, public relations, etc.). The workload for these positions—plus for Council, our committees, publications editors, etc.—as grown exponentially. For instance, I can't even imagine how many SHAFR-related emails Amy receives every day. I'm not sure this situation is sustainable. I don't have a solution, but I do worry about burning out our leaders and/or deterring strong future leaders from seeking these roles.

**AT:** Not at the moment. You all are doing a great job, in my opinion.

**LT:** We might want to collaborate more closely with other related organizations, such as the Society for History in the Federal Government and the Society for Military History, to see if we can figure out how to advocate for the work of historians in our fields in academia and beyond, and how to better support our graduate students on the job market. We cannot grow as an organization or even sustain our current membership if current graduate students cannot find jobs after they finish their degrees.

**CW:** I assume that SHAFR is not alone in facing challenges of retaining, engaging, and expanding its membership. I wonder if SHAFR can learn any lessons from other professional organizations, particularly those of a similar size?

**SZ:** The job materials and teaching workshops provided significant advantages to me as I was preparing to graduate and make my way as a Ph.D. I warmly commend that these workshops be continued (and potentially expanded).