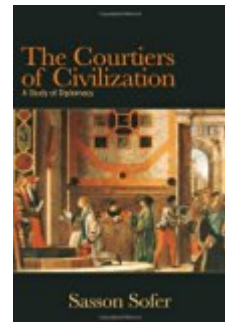


**Sasson Sofer.** *The Courtiers of Civilization: A Study of Diplomacy.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. 124 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-4893-0.



**Reviewed by** Steve Harris

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In an era of ministerial tweets and seemingly nonstop Euro-summitry, are diplomats still important? Sasson Sofer argues that they are and that polishing up their reputation will make their value more apparent. In particular, he implies that diplomats hold a distinctive role as moral guardians of the international community that, despite centuries of disparagement, they should struggle to uphold. But it is one thing to prescribe a stance for diplomats of the twenty-first century, a second to rehearse the history of how diplomats have been perceived, and a third to discern how diplomats can maintain their moral integrity in the semi-anarchy of the states system. Not so prescriptive as to be a primer, not so rooted in the archives as to be a treatise, not so current as to be a handbook, not so analytic as to be a history, *Courtiers* falls between several stools.

Sofer's goal is to "construct a more coherent and implicitly more favorable profile of professional diplomats than emerges from their popular image" (p. x). But, beyond the issue of image, his focus seems more on reasserting a claim for diplo-

mats as moral actors, as "custodians of the idea of international society" (p. 67), despite the continuing challenges of national politics, *raison d'état*, and an erroneous public image.

The brief text (seventy-four pages) is divided into eight substantive chapters; each includes a mix of historical perspective, comments from the literature, current concerns, and Sofer's musings. Together they cover the many facets of the diplomatic environment. He opens with a cursory review of the history of diplomacy in chapter 1, followed by an exploration of the nature of diplomacy, considered from the perspectives of commentators grouped into a "realist school," practicing diplomats' "integrative" approach, early modern writers' consensual view, and the culturally inclusive model of the English school. In chapter 3, Sofer touches on diplomatic conventions and rituals, while chapter 4 notes the shifting settings in which diplomacy has been practiced over the centuries. He explores the importance of diplomatic language in chapter 5, and diplomats' social and political context is the subject of chapter 6. The

most extensive discussion, in chapter 7, addresses the tensions between diplomats' national character and their role as a "symbol of peace, a custodian of public virtues" (p. 55). Finally, in chapter 8, Sofer recapitulates his apologia for diplomacy in the face of its new challenges in the twenty-first century.

According to Sofer, diplomats have been calumniated for centuries and he rehearses a roster of critiques that he seeks to rebut, including disingenuity, expediency, and outdated social mores. However, what we are offered in response is a postulated nobility of purpose, bolstered largely by an anecdotal approach to aphorisms, personalities, and events, with little sense of historical context or continuity. The closest Sofer comes to redeeming this beknighted class is to claim their moral role; but he does not provide them with either a coherent foundation or a clear expression of standards and goals to guide their behavior, without which standing in the face of conflicting state interests is a hopeless task. It is easy, in retrospect, to praise the ethics of certain diplomats in the context of the rise of Nazism, but, in the moment, decisions were not so simple and, if diplomats are, in fact, charged to pursue the interests of the states they represent and to "secure good relations with their host countries" (p. 25), then by which standard—moral or ministerial—should we judge them, either as individuals or as a group?

Sofer's reflective book is richly supported; the apparatus is 40 percent of the length of the text. He draws from a robust list of academic secondary sources, although archival sources are almost entirely absent and there are but a dozen or so commentaries or memoirs by his diplomatic subjects. More specifically, for a work that seeks to rebut a mistaken "popular" image of diplomats, there are no exemplars of popular media such as journalistic accounts of diplomatic doings, general literature, or even widely read serious analyses.

Sofer identifies the current challenges of the diplomatic profession, including instant communications, the proliferation of nongovernmental players and international organizations, and a ubiquitous public media presence, and stresses that there "is no substitute for ... a resident envoy" (p. 73). Some analysis or guidance, or at least some prognosis would be helpful; but he offers only nostalgia for a time when "courtiers" were customary and "civilization" was learned on the Grand Tour.

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