

Interview

Studying for a PhD in the United States

Kirsten Soer | The Ohio State University

This interview was conducted in spring 2026 with current first-year PhD student Kirsten Soer, a former editor for the Netherlands American Studies Review who is now based at The Ohio State University

Question 1: Can you tell us a bit about yourself. What is the focus of your PhD research? What was your academic journey prior to starting the PhD?

Yes, absolutely. I specialize in the history of US foreign relations, also known as diplomatic history. I am particularly interested in the role of non-state actors – such as activists, consumers, and diplomatic spouses – in interpreting and shaping events on the global stage. One of the perks of pursuing a PhD in the US rather than in Europe, however, is that you do not have to settle on a topic right away. The first two to three years are taken up by course work and end in your candidacy exams. I will take my exams next year and start writing my dissertation after, so for now I am keeping my options open on my final research topic. That said, I will most likely focus my dissertation on progressive women's activism and informal diplomacy during the mid- to late Cold War, which is something I already started thinking about while still studying in the Netherlands

Before applying to graduate school, I spent a lot of time at Leiden University. I graduated with a BA in Classics and a minor in Chinese Studies in 2020, in the midst of COVID. I wasn't a huge fan of online classes, so I took a gap year in hopes of being able to do my master's degree in person. I got really interested in the history of US-East Asian relations during that year, and the immediate postwar US occupation of Japan particularly started to fascinate me. It was such a unique moment in which the US had just emerged from World War II with this huge power to reshape war-torn countries in its image, but in which it was not yet completely bogged down by Cold War concerns. It was with this interest in mind that I decided to pursue an MA in Asian Studies as well as one in North American Studies (including the premaster I needed to qualify). I loved both of these degrees and was very hesitant to graduate and have to leave! Once I ran out of side quests – e.g., serving on the board of study association LUNAS, editing here at the *Netherlands American Studies Review*, and interning at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies – it was a fairly easy decision to pursue a PhD, even if this meant leaving behind the academic community and programs I had grown so comfortable with.

Question 2: Why did you decide to apply to the US for your PhD? Any advice for those considering applying to PhDs at US universities?

That's a good question. I guess I sort of "rolled into it," as they say. The first time anyone told me that I should consider pursuing a PhD, I looked at them as if they didn't know what they were talking about. It took me a while to build the confidence to apply for anything, but over the course of my master's degrees I realized that I wanted to try: a corporate job sounded much less fun than graduate school, and I couldn't keep pursuing master's degrees forever. The decision to go to the US then partly stemmed from my inability to settle on a topic.

There are great opportunities to pursue a PhD in Europe too, but you have to wait for the right vacancy and tailor your research proposal to the topic at hand. In the US, you can just apply with your own interests and hope for the best. That appealed to me because I work better when I am truly passionate about a topic. I also liked the idea of doing two more years of course work to orient myself. Since I only started studying US history after completing my bachelor's degree, spending two more years reading books sounded helpful.

As for advice, I think the most important thing is to know yourself. It can be quite difficult and lonely to move to the other side of the Atlantic. Bureaucracy is terrible anywhere but much worse when you are not familiar with the system (and the woman on the phone at the IRS asks you to spell "the Netherlands" three times, either unable or unwilling to recognize it as a valid country of origin). The academic culture is also different: Americans take themselves a lot more seriously and have a very different understanding of work/life balance than Dutch people do. The intensity of a PhD program can take a toll on your personal life and physical health too. That is something to watch out for. On the other hand, if you love the work and believe in your project, grad school can be really exciting. I have made a lot of friends who are equally nerdy and suffer the same stresses as I do. Some programs are a bit toxic and overly competitive, but ours strikes a good balance. If you show that you are willing to cooperate and have a good sense of humor, even the most ambitious people are likely to loosen up.

The best advice I can give to those debating whether to apply is to talk to people who know both you and the academic field well. Current PhD students and professors should be able to tell if it is a good fit. I was very skeptical when someone told me: "grad school is tough but you're eccentric enough to enjoy it;" but it turns out they were right. If you are still on the fence after talking it through, you can also just apply. The application fees are criminally high (approximately 100\$ per application), but I think it is better to apply and not get in than to spend the rest of your life wondering "what if?"

Question 3: What has been your experience of the PhD program so far? Has anything surprised you?

Oh, it has been lovely; intense and tiring, but lovely. The first two to three years are somewhat similar to doing a master's degree in the Netherlands, but much faster paced. Afterwards, you take your comprehensive exams (also known as general or candidacy exams), which qualify you to do dissertation research. I take mine next spring and should be ready to start working on my dissertation after. I like taking courses alongside people with similar interests. Everyone is always exceptionally well-prepared, so the discussions are usually good. You can learn a lot from each other. Outside of class, we rely on each other to unwind too. Especially during the first semester, a lot of us really invested in making friends. I have seen some of the smartest people I have ever met crumble during drinking matches. I will remember that in case they ever become famous.

The worst and most surprising aspect of grad school, by far, is the ubiquity of sports. This might more so apply to me, as I go to a big sports university, but I think it is true in general. Two of my fellow students convinced me once to go to a basketball game with them. Everything was utterly commercialized. There are even mini games attached to the game, in which the audience can win things such as T-shirts and fried chicken. The games are well

attended too, even by historians who, in my opinion, should have more important things to concern themselves with.

Question 4: Have you noticed any impact from the current political climate?

How is the atmosphere on campus?

The atmosphere is good. You can detect the impact of politics if you look for it, but it is also easy to ignore. International students are advised to always carry their documents – not just passports and visas but also a host of registration forms – and we receive notifications when the authorities are on campus (which has happened a few times). For the most part, though, it is business as usual. People do not talk about politics as much as you would think. Academia is relatively left-leaning, but that does not mean that everyone is on the same page about everything. I feel like most people avoid political topics in case they lead to heated discussions. There is also a sense of resignation, I think. Perhaps this is different in other areas, as Ohio is a relatively conservative state. I can imagine that other US universities might have very lively activist scenes. When I walk to the history department, conversely, I am much more likely to be invited to join some fringe religious denomination than I am to run into a political protest.

Thank you Kirsten for speaking with us, and best of luck with your ongoing academic journey!