While a member of Colonel Edward House's organization called the Inquiry, Frank A. Golder complained to Inquiry leaders about the paucity of source materials in the U.S. for writing his reports on Eastern Europe that might be used by the American delegation at the peace conference following World War I. Little did he realize at the time, 1918, that in the 1920s he would be a major collector of documents, helping to correct this archival limitation. In 1920, he became a curator of the Russian and East European section at the Hoover War Collection Library (now Hoover Institution). Originated by historian Ephraim D. Adams and financed by Herbert Hoover, the Hoover War Collection began as an archival center regarding World War I—politically, socially, economically, and militarily. During his first collecting trip to Europe, from 1920 to 1923, Golder collected millions of documents in Soviet Russia, establishing the Hoover Library as the largest archive of Russian documents in the U.S. Before collecting documents in Soviet Russia, he collected documents in Western Europe, Central Europe, the Baltic, Eastern Europe, and Southeastern Europe. His trip through Southeastern Europe took him to Bulgaria, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes where he collected documents for the historian to use as clues to the past. This essay will concentrate on Golder's collecting trip through the Balkans, describing what he collected, what tactics he employed, the problems he faced, and the extraordinary experience he had.

But first, who was this collector Golder? He was born in 1877 in Odessa in the Ukraine of German-Jewish parents. At the age of eight, he, his brothers and sisters, and his parents immigrated to the U.S. because of pogroms and impoverishment in the Ukraine. The family settled in New Jersey, where poverty claimed them there too. Through the financial assistance of a Baptist minister, however, Golder managed to acquire an education at local
schools, then at a prep school in Kentucky, and finally at Bucknell University, where he earned the equivalent to a B.A. degree. In search of adventure, Golder then taught native school children on a remote island, Unga, in Alaska for three years, from 1899 to 1902. From this experience, at times lonely and depressing, he showed personality traits and values that characterized his life: a sense of adventure, self-reliance, resolution, forebearance, kindness, and humbleness—not to mention a hunger for knowledge.

In 1903, Golder received an M.A. and in 1909 a doctorate in history from Harvard University. He focused on Russian and American history, studying under Archibald Cary Coolidge, a pioneer in the development of Russian studies in the U.S. After graduating, Golder took a professorship in history at Washington State College. In 1914, he did research in St. Petersburg's archives of Tsarist Russia and saw the outbreak of World War I, noting in his diary the pervasive patriotic fervor. Returning to the U.S., he established a scholarly reputation on Russo-American relations with the publication of a book and several articles. In 1917, he again traveled to Russia and, on this occasion, he came face to face in the streets of Petrograd with the March Russian Revolution. Like many Russians of the time, he greeted the March Revolution with enthusiasm, favoring the creation of liberal institutions. As in 1914, he deepened his practical experience of Russia, of its classes, its politics, and its economy.

Golder missed the November Bolshevik Revolution, having left Russia for the U.S. In 1917, though, he became a member of the Inquiry, writing reports on Russia's provinces—the Ukraine, Lithuania, Siberia. His reports showed independent judgment, challenging the Wilsonian precepts of self-determination, a factor which may have prevented him from being selected as a member of the delegation to Paris. Then, in 1920, he joined the history department at Stanford University, and also became a document collector and curator at the Hoover Library. Not only did he collect documents from 1920-23, he also helped save millions of starving Russians during the Soviet famine as a special representative of Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration. In 1922, he participated in the Warren Harding administration's attempts to bring about diplomatic and economic relations between the U.S. and Soviet Russia; Golder believed in accommodation rather than in recrimination in Soviet-American relations. Between 1924 and 1928, he directed the