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ALEXANDER III AND THE POLICY OF "RUSSIFICATION," 1883-1886



This collection, as seen through the eyes of the British diplomatic corps in Russia, provides a unique analysis of this "retro-reform" policy, including the increase of revolutionary agitation, deepening of conservatism and changes from agrarian to industrial society, and spread of pan-Slavism, both in the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe. The British Foreign Office Records of General Correspondence for Russia, in record class F.O. 65, is the basic collection of documents for studying Anglo-Russian relations during this period of fundamental change.

Date Range: 1883-1886

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Detailed Description:

The assassination of Alexander II, the reformer Czar, brought to the throne his son Alexander III. Alexander III condemned the influence of Western culture, ideas, and liberalist reforms supported by his father. He believed that Russia had lost its domineering role in Eastern Europe due to Western liberalism and the only way for Russia to regain its position was through a process he instituted called "Russification."

In Alexander III's opinion, Russia was to be saved from anarchy, social disorders, and revolution, not by the parliamentary institutions and so-called liberalism of Western Europe, but by the three principles indigenous to Russia and the "natural pride of every Russian patriot"—Slavic nationalism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the autocracy. His political ideal was a nation containing only one nationality, one language, one religion and one form of administration; and he did his utmost to prepare for the realization of this ideal by imposing the Russian language and Russian schools on his German, Polish and other non-Russian subjects, by fostering Eastern Orthodoxy at the expense of other religions, by persecuting Jews and by destroying the remnants of German, Polish and Swedish institutions in the outlying provinces.

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British Foreign Office Recordkeeping

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The office of principal secretary of state for foreign affairs and, with it, a separate Foreign Office came into existence in 1782. Before that time the conduct of foreign relations as well as various aspects of domestic administration had been the responsibility of the sovereign's principal secretaries of state.

Throughout the 19th century, the Foreign Office establishment gradually increased and regular divisions of labor and procedures were instituted. By 1898 the office consisted of the secretary of state; the permanent undersecretary, who became the acknowledged head of the office and supervised the main political departments; and the parliamentary undersecretary, who was involved with political affairs.

Correspondence arriving during office hours was opened by an undersecretary, sent to the appropriate department for entry in the departmental register, and returned to the undersecretary for transmission to the secretary of state. Either the undersecretary or the clerks might minute the correspondence. The secretary of state also might make observations on the dispatch and initial it to indicate that he had seen it. Dispatches arriving after office hours were opened by a resident clerk and sent to the departmental senior clerks for registration and finally forwarded to the clerks, undersecretary, and secretary of state.

Dispatches and drafts relating to important matters were copied and circulated to the prime minister and the sovereign. Other papers of less importance were circulated to the cabinet.

The Foreign Office was organized along departmental lines, with the departments grouped into two basic categories: political and non-political. The political departments, which were responsible for the conduct of diplomatic relations with other countries, were reorganized several times during 19th century. The general reorganization of 1882 reduced the number of political departments to three. The Eastern (Europe) Department was responsible for Russia as well as Greece, Montenegro, Rumania, Serbia, Turkey, Egypt, Persia, and central Asia. Among the nonpolitical departments were the consular, commercial, and treaty departments.

The correspondence arriving in the Foreign Office was divided between "foreign" correspondence (material originating abroad, generally from British embassies and consulates) and "domestic" correspondence, which was further divided into notes from foreign representatives in London and notes from other British government departments, institutions, and individuals. Foreign correspondence was categorized by department (political, consular, commercial, etc.).

Dispatches originating in British embassies and consulates followed a prescribed format. Each dispatch was to be on a single topic, enclosures were to be numbered, and any enclosure in a foreign language other than French was to be accompanied with a translation. Each post, embassy or consulate, indicated the sequence of dispatches by numbering them consecutively; this "local" or "dispatch" number enabled the Foreign Office to determine if dispatches had been lost in transit or unduly delayed. The heads of missions docketed their own dispatches with their name, date the dispatch was sent, place of origin, number of enclosures, means of conveyance, and a précis of the contents.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in its entirety, the Scholarly Resources microfilm collection entitled *British Foreign Office: Russia Correspondence, 1883-1886*.