

State Papers Online Eighteenth Century, Part II: State Papers Foreign: Low Countries and Germany: an Introduction

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Various source media, State Papers Online



The State Papers Foreign in the National Archives at Kew provide a cornucopia of interest. They are the fundamental source for British foreign policy, but are also of great significance for the understanding of foreign states. As such, these State Papers offer a fundamental introduction to pre- revolutionary Europe. Indeed, because the quantity of despatches from British diplomats far exceeded that of the instructions they received, there is necessarily much material on foreign states. This material reflected the extent to which the British government sought to follow both the policies of foreign states, and the developments abroad that affected their strength. Indeed, this was an aspect of the extent to which information was a key element of the currency of diplomacy, while the latter was less stylised and restricted within Europe than diplomatic links in certain other parts of the world, notably East Asia.

State Papers Foreign offer much for an understanding of the development of the German states in this period. The key German states for scrutiny were Austria and Prussia, but these were not the sole ones of relevance. Northern Europe contained key listening posts that provided information on developments elsewhere in Europe. This was particularly true of The Hague and Hamburg, the subject of essays by Hugh Dunthorne and Andrew Thompson respectively. For example, State Papers Hamburg (SP 82) is a major, underrated source for Russia. This was not so much due to the commercial links, important as they were, but rather the bustling, self-important figure of Sir Cyril Wych, who represented Britain in the Hanse towns from 1713 until 1741 when he was posted to Russia, where he served from 1742 until 1744. Wych was of importance because he had very close links with Duke Charles

Frederick of Holstein-Gottorp, the reversionary claimant to the Swedish throne who resided in Russia following his marriage in 1724 to Peter the Great's elder daughter by his second wife. Through marriage, this relatively minor German ruler became a key figure in the Russian succession since Peter had no heir: having been responsible for the death of his son, the Tsaravich Alexis. In seeking appointment as British envoy to Russia in 1725, Wych stressed his close links, and other commentators noted the same. In 1735, the British government gave Wych permission to accept the Duke's offer of the Order of St Anne.^[1] Much of Wych's information derived from the Holstein connection, and this makes his reports particularly valuable, as other British diplomats in Russia, such as Claudius Rondeau, tended to have poor relations with the Holstein court.^[2]

The value of indirect sources, in the form of diplomats not accredited to the court in question, can be further demonstrated in the case of Russia. For example, State Papers Saxony throw light on an unsuccessful British attempt to create links with Russia in 1725.^[3] In turn, Philip, 4th Earl of Chesterfield reported from The Hague in 1732 on an approach for an alliance from the Russian envoy Count Golovkin, whilst Thomas Robinson reported from Vienna on contacts that year with Count Levenwold, envoy and favourite of Tsarina Anna.^[4]

As Thompson and Wilson note, the significance and energy of individual diplomats, such as Onslow Burrish and George Cressener, were such that generally minor postings in the German states could take on particular significance. Burrish, a punctilious diplomat, made Munich an important centre of information for British diplomacy.^[5] Burrish's correspondence also testified to the significance of commercial factors. For example, in 1755 he wrote to Robert, 4th Earl of Holderness, the

Secretary of State, that 'although I have never received any immediate commands upon this subject, yet as the utility of the thing was self-evident, I have continued my endeavours to introduce the use of our tobacco into this Electorate [Bavaria], and I have now succeeded'. He followed this up by pressing for the import of sugar from the British West Indies.^[6] Trade was also significant at other postings. Indeed, the complexity of the lengthy mid-century attempt to develop trade with Austria and the Austrian Netherlands encouraged the appointment of particular individuals. For instance, James Porter acted as Commissary in Vienna, while in Antwerp commissioners under Martin Bladen were responsible for the negotiations.^[7]

George Cressener was a more ambiguous figure than Burrish, and one who was very much a provider of intelligence information. He was Resident in Liège from 1747 to 1755, and then Minister in Cologne until he was expelled by the French in 1759. At which time he moved to Maastricht where he was given credentials as chargé d'affaires in the United Provinces to provide some protection. Cressener not only maintained agents in parts of the Austrian Netherlands, but was also a regular source of intelligence in Paris. The quality of his reports was high.^[8]

Military functions played other roles in representation in Germany, as envoys were expected to raise subsidy troops to assist British goals, and to also act as an appropriate envoy to rulers interested in war. In the former case, Brigadier Richard Sutton, who had been intended for Berlin in 1726, instead went to Cassel (1727-9), and, then as Major-General, to Wolfenbüttel (1730-1). The frequent appointment of military men not only reflected the absence of notions of specialisation and technical training in diplomacy, and the military

men's already-demonstrated willingness to serve the Crown and their availability in peacetime, but it also reflected the sense that such envoys were especially appropriate for particular courts, notably Berlin.

Lieutenant-General William, 1st Earl Cadogan, a prominent commander in the War of the Spanish Succession, was sent on embassies to Vienna in 1715 and 1720. However, as an instance of the problems with drawing such ready comparisons, Cadogan served in The Hague for most of the period 1714-21 where his conduct as an envoy was criticised by Horatio Walpole: 'General Cadogan was indeed a great military officer and acted in negotiating more like an officer than a minister'.^[9] The brother of Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister from 1720 to 1742, Horatio was envoy at The Hague in 1715-16, 1722, 1734-7, and 1739, and was succeeded by his protégé Robert Trevor, who served until 1747.

Alongside Paris, The Hague was the central point in the British diplomatic system. As a consequence, envoys there were kept alert to developments. Townshend wrote of The Hague in 1724: 'This post being reckoned the best and most agreeable of any abroad' and presented it to William Finch as 'the just reward of the good services you have done him [George I] in Sweden'. Thomas, Duke of Newcastle wrote to John, 4th Earl of Sandwich in 1748, 'I can never think of your quitting The Hague: that is, and must be, the centre of all business, both of peace and war'. In 1751, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams thought The Hague a 'desirable' posting 'in our trade. The Minister at that court has the secret lodged in him and may make a figure'.^[10] Hugh Dunthorne's essay discusses the aspects of the role.

Vienna was also a significant, as well as prestigious, posting, most notably during the period up to 1756, when the two powers were allies. Moreover, the Hanoverian interests of the Crown added another dimension of significance. Although regarded as dull (or at least duller than Paris or The Hague) Vienna was seen as preferable to Berlin.^[11]

The State Papers Foreign reveal the perspectives and opinions of Britain's diplomats abroad. Often what emerges from the documents is the importance and influence of individual personalities and connections, for example in the cases of Sir Cyril Wych, Onslow Burrish, and George Cressener. Through the accounts of individuals, the State Papers Foreign offer a wider narrative of events and trends across eighteenth century Europe. The diplomatic approaches and priorities of Britain, and other states, can be traced through the papers, which cover a variety of subjects, from trade interests to military concerns. As a result, these State Papers are of fundamental importance. They constitute a key source for the study of foreign policy in the Low Countries and Germany, and for history in general, during this period.

NOTES

^[1] Wych to George Tilson, Under-Secretary of State, 23 Mar. 1725; William, 1st Earl of Harrington, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, to Wych, 19 Dec. 1735, NA. SP. 82/42, 56.

^[2] Wych to Tilson, 23 Mar. 1725, NA. SP. 82/42.

^[3] Charles, 2nd Viscount Townshend, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, to Edward Finch, envoy in Dresden, 14 Sept. 1725, NA. SP. 88/30.

^[4] Chesterfield to Harrington, 11 Jan., Robinson to Harrington, 5 Jan. 1732, NA. SP. 84/316, 80/84.

^[5] Earl of Hyndford to Burrish, 27 Feb. 1752, NA. SP. 110/6.

^[6] Burrish to Holderness, 12 Aug. 1755, NA. SP. 81/105.

^[7] Bladen, '...the Matters which gave rise to the Conferences at Antwerp', NA. SP. 80/36 fols 138-47; P.G.M. Dickson, 'English Commercial Negotiations with Austria, 1737-1752', in A. Whiteman, J.S. Bromley and Dickson (eds), *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 81-112.

^[8] A. Schulte, *Ein englischer Gesandter am Rhein: George Cressener* (Bonn, 1971) deals largely with his career after the Seven Years' War.

^[9] 'Mr Walpole's Apology', London, British Library, Additional Manuscripts, vol. 9132 fol. 81.

^[10] Townshend to Finch, 17 July 1724, Leicester, County Record Office, DG/7/4/4752; Newcastle to Sandwich, 12 Jan. 1748, Hanbury Williams to Henry Fox, 17 June 1751, BL. Add. 32811, 51393.

^[11] Thomas Robinson to Edward Weston, 20 May 1741, NA. SP. 80/145.

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