The German States, Hamburg and the Hanse and their Relations with Great Britain in the Eighteenth Century

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‘Germany’ in the eighteenth century was a geographical, as opposed to political, expression. The area that includes the modern Federal republic, Austria and parts of the Czech and Slovak republics was linked together by being part of the Holy Roman Empire, although Voltaire famously quipped that it was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. When eighteenth century British politicians talked about ‘the Empire’, they could just as easily have been referring to Britain’s relations with central Europe as to territorial possessions overseas.

The political structure of the Holy Roman Empire was complicated. Britain’s relations with its constituent territories were therefore necessarily complex too. The Holy Roman Emperor was titular head of state - the imperial title was elective. From the middle of the fifteenth century until 1740, the person elected had been a member of the Habsburg family, the rulers of much of the territory in the south-east of Empire. At the beginning of the War of the Austrian succession (1740-48), there was a brief interlude when a Wittelsbach from Bavaria (Charles VII, r. 1742-5) held the imperial title. On Charles VII’s death, another Habsburg was elected and the title remained in that family until Napoleon dissolved the Empire in 1806. The Habsburg emperors, like most early-modern European rulers, were peripatetic in their habits. Given that many of the territories that they ruled were held together simply through possessing the same ruler, it was important that they were both linguistically competent and travelled sufficiently to make themselves a visible presence throughout their vast domains. This was particularly important in the early eighteenth century. The Ottomans had besieged Vienna in 1683 but between then and 1718, the Habsburgs had retaken Hungary and expansion south-eastwards continued thereafter.

These changes had a series of consequences for British diplomacy in the region. First, it meant that British diplomats attached to the Habsburg court sometimes had to travel to Graz, Innsbruck or Budapest to keep abreast of developments. Secondly, the Habsburg territorial gains outside the boundaries of the Empire meant that there was an increasing tension between those officials who favoured a ‘Habsburg’ policy with a focus on the dynasty’s expanding European empire and those who remained committed to active involvement in the politics of the Holy Roman Empire. Diplomats in Vienna had to be very wary of the complex factional relationships and rivalries at court. Yet British diplomats in Vienna were also well placed to keep a watchful eye on developments across central, southern and eastern Europe because Vienna was rapidly becoming a centre of news and communication, with its transport links into the Balkans and towards Russia. More generally, British diplomats within the Empire were able to keep track of news and intelligence effectively through the highly-developed imperial postal network.

Beneath the Habsburgs, in terms of precedence, came the Electors who, as their name suggested, were entitled to elect the Emperor. Originally, there had been seven: the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne and Trier and the secular rulers of Brandenburg, the Palatinate and Saxony, alongside the King of Bohemia (a title held by the Habsburgs). At the end of the Thirty Years War, Bavaria had been added to this number and Hanover in the 1690s.
British representation at these courts was far from uniform in the eighteenth century. Hanover was the most unusual case. Hanover had undergone a rapid rise in status in the second half of the seventeenth century which had been confirmed by securing electoral status. There was a reasonably consistent British diplomatic presence in Hanover in the early eighteenth century but this was more a function of the fact that the Act of Settlement (1701) had placed the succession to the British thrones in the hands of Elector Georg Ludwig’s mother, the Dowager Electress Sophia. Hence, it was vital that Whitehall was kept informed about the attitudes of the court from which Anne’s successor was likely to come. After 1714, British representation in Hanover ceased until 1837 when the Personal Union was dissolved, although British diplomats were relatively frequent visitors to Hanover between 1714 and 1760 to attend either George I or II, who returned frequently to their German domains. These visits provided excellent opportunities for George I and II to conduct their diplomacy in person, away from the prying eyes associated with a growing public sphere in London. It is, therefore, useful to compare the materials available in SP 43 with the accounts of individual states found more generally in this section. There are some copies of the material to be found in SP 43 for some of the return visits to Hanover in SP 80/231-6. Likewise, James Haldane’s mission to Heidelberg in 1720 (detailed in SP 81/120) also receives considerable coverage in SP 43/2-3.

British diplomats in Germany, although formally part of a separate structure from their Hanoverian counterparts, also had to deal with the reality of working for the same ruler. In some instances, their hosts would actively seek to play British and Hanoverian interests off against each other, claiming that a particular policy was being pursued for Hanover ends and was there anything that the British diplomats could do to curtail it? British diplomats were also, however, frequently instructed to keep in close contact with their Hanoverian colleagues and to take advantage of their local knowledge. This might extend to using them to provide guidance through the complexities of the Empire’s institutional and constitutional framework or simply for pointing out appropriate behaviour and etiquette. In some cases, British and Hanoverian diplomats even produced joint dispatches, such as the letter written from Vienna on 9 May 1720 (SP 80/41 f. 46) by two British and one Hanoverian diplomat. This is an excellent example of the advantages of being able to call on expert technical knowledge (in this case, on the correct procedures for dealing with religious complaints) from a Hanoverian colleague - one of those in British service also happened to be Swiss, François Pesme de Saint Saphorin. He had been employed to deal with imperial affairs precisely because of his expertise, although he also had a tendency to write lengthy dispatches and overly long letters were still known in the 1730s amongst the Secretary of State’s staff as ‘Saint Saphorins’!

A British diplomatic presence in Vienna was reasonably constant throughout the eighteenth century. The same was true of the electorates of Brandenburg-Prussia and Saxony - these records can be found in SP 88 and SP 90 respectively. Direct British representation at the Imperial Diet (the major representative institution of the Empire) in Regensburg was reasonably common at the start of the eighteenth century but declined as the period went on. This reflected an increasing reliance on
Hanoverian contacts and a slow move away from seeing the Empire itself as an important diplomatic player and a shift towards concentrating on representation at individual courts. In some states, however, the British presence was sporadic and depended, to a significant degree, on context and utility.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, it was relatively common for a British diplomat to be stationed in Hessen-Kassel. There were a variety of reasons for this. Like many other German states, the rulers of Hessen-Kassel held multiple territories and the family were closely connected to the Swedish royal family. Consequently, keeping a weather-eye on developments within a relatively small German territory might also yield insights about the direction of policy in militarily and regionally important kingdom of Sweden.

Additionally, Hessen-Kassel in the early eighteenth century was an important player in the European ‘soldier trade’. One of the ways in which some of the smaller German states sought to gain protection and financial reward was by hiring their regiments out to larger states. Within Britain the idea of keeping up a large army in peace time was politically controversial because of the fears that evoked either of the Cromwellian regime of the 1650s or James II’s alleged attempts to subvert the constitution in the 1680s. After 1688, British rulers sought to get round these concerns by signing subsidy agreements with either the United Provinces or the smaller German states. Hessian troops, for example, were retained in the 1720s to help put down the Jacobite rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6 and were later controversial participants in the American Wars of Independence.

The locations of other British diplomats within the German states can also be directly related to military and strategic questions. Onslow Burrish was sent to Munich in 1745, after the death of the only Wittelsbach Emperor, at a point at which Britain was looking to improve relations with a German state who had previously opposed Britain’s Habsburg allies. Burrish had a peripatetic life over the next decade or so, using Munich as a base from which to travel to other German courts to secure British interests. He was one of a number of diplomats who found himself involved in the plans by the Duke of Newcastle in the 1750s to ensure that Maria Theresa’s son was elected King of the Romans, making him the next candidate likely to be elected emperor. Newcastle was concerned that the trauma of a non-Habsburg emperor should not be repeated, both because of his inherent interest in keeping things as they were but also because he was a staunch advocate of the ‘Old System’. When diplomats and politicians talked about the ‘Old System’ they were referring to the alliances between Britain, the United Provinces and the Habsburgs in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that had been key to efforts to contain the power of France. Continued adherence to such views illustrates the extent to which diplomats and politicians were very often conditioned by the experiences and situations of their youth and found it hard to adapt to new circumstances. A perennial problem of British diplomacy in central Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century was that the rise of Prussia and Russia had created new powers that were no longer willing to play the roles allotted to them in British strategic thinking of simply being pawns that could be used to contain French power.
Britain was one of the most belligerent of the eighteenth-century great powers. Management of money and men was therefore important. Considerable insights into the practicalities of this process can be gained from looking at the papers (SP 81/125-42) related to George Cressener’s sojourn in Cologne during the Seven Years War (1756-63). Interestingly, having been resident in Westphalia during the war, Cressener continued in Cologne afterwards. Further examples of diplomats and soldiers being stationed in central Europe for primarily military reasons can be multiplied through SP 8.

A rather different priority of British diplomacy can also be observed, though. Aside from existential concerns about security, sovereignty and survival, diplomacy also existed to support British economic activity as well. The best example of this can be found in the British resident to Hamburg and the Hanseatic League (SP 82). The Hanse towns had been important trading partners for Britain for a long time so it made sense for there to be British representation there. As was often the case with postings designed primarily for commercial purposes, British diplomats in Hamburg were rarely of particularly high rank or status (indeed, for much of the first half of the eighteenth century, it was very much a family affair for various members of the Wich clan). Residents in Hamburg often found themselves having to intervene in disputes about trade and shipping, as well as helping out British sailors who had got themselves into difficulties. It was a mundane, but necessary, task.

One of the noticeable features of many British diplomats serving at German courts was the length of time that they remained in post. This had advantages, in terms of increasing expertise and contacts, but it could also lead to being caught between two worlds. In May 1738, Thomas Robinson, who served in Vienna for nearly two decades, wrote to the Secretary of State, the Earl of Harrington, that he had been surprised on his recent visit to London that ‘the People of England were, in great measure, fallen off from that Tenderness...which they used to have for the very Name of Austria’ (SP 80/130 Robinson to Harrington, 28/5/1738). Robinson’s absence from London made him feel like a ‘curious Traveller’ in his own country; yet some of those around the Secretary of State felt that he had ‘gone native’ and become too compliant towards Austrian demands.

British representatives in central Europe faced a variety of challenges in the eighteenth century. They had to deal with complicated and unfamiliar patterns of etiquette and behaviour, cope with working with (occasionally resentful) Hanoverian colleagues and handle major issues of war and peace. All of this reflected the dynastic and strategic importance of the German states for Britain. Then, as now, keeping abreast of what was going on in Germany was vital for working out what was going on in Europe as a whole.

FURTHER READING


J. Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2012), volume II