

Introduction to State Papers Online: Eighteenth Century 1714-1782, Part 3: Western Europe. British Diplomacy in Western Europe

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Various source media, State Papers Online



The State Papers are excellent sources for the foreign policy of Britain and other states and, indirectly, for the processes of policy formation and government in all the states covered. This collection covers Britain's relations with her leading opponents, France and Spain, as well as with a series of lesser powers, notably Portugal and the Italian states.

Relations with rival states were variously crucial and broken off; the range and nature of diplomatic representation reflected in particular whether Britain was at war. During the Nine Years' War of 1689-97, between France and a coalition of Britain, Austria, the Dutch Republic, Spain and Savoy-Piedmont, and again during the War of the Spanish Succession of 1702-13, when Britain, Austria, the Dutch, Portugal and Savoy-Piedmont fought France and Spain, British diplomatic relations with her enemies came to an end. This period was succeeded by a period in which links resumed and representation was extended. Indeed, Britain was closely allied with France from 1716 to 1731. In turn, war in 1739-48, the War of Jenkins' Ear with Spain and the War of the Austrian Succession with France, caused abrupt hiatuses in key international relationships. At its end in 1748, James Wallace, clerk in the Secretary of State's office⁽¹⁾ anticipated the resumption of normal diplomatic activity in noting: 'The Peace will send many new ministers abroad.' The active foreign policy of the subsequent inter-war period, especially the attempt to win Spanish support and to push through the Imperial Election Scheme, gave diplomats much to do, which is reflected in the quantity and coverage of the State Papers of the period.

Conversely, during the Seven Years' War (1756-63) much of Europe was opposed to Britain or unsympathetic. Diplomatic links were severed or

downgraded. Where they continued, British diplomats had to devote much attention to protecting trade from privateering.

Peace negotiations brought a revival in diplomatic links, most significantly in 1763, and this lasted until foreign participation in the War of American Independence severed Britain's relations again, with France in 1778 and with Spain in 1779.

War and peace were not the sole variables. Other issues also affected the diplomatic network, notably in the case of Naples, a new state created when Don Carlos was made king after the Spanish conquest in 1734. A new state necessitated the establishment of a diplomatic station so, in 1753, Sir James Gray became the first British Envoy Extraordinary in Naples.

Earlier, greater British representation in Italy had reflected the importance of the peninsula in the power politics surrounding and following the Wars of the Spanish Succession (1702-13) and the Quadruple Alliance (1718-20). In particular, Savoy-Piedmont was a significant ally, while Britain sought to prevent the lesser Italian powers from supporting its opponents. At the same time, there was clearly a sense that the key decisions were still taken outside the peninsula and that states such as Genoa, Parma and Tuscany were of relatively limited importance. This encouraged episodic representation and the expedient of an envoy with a commission to all the princes and states of Italy, or responsible for all or most of them: Charles, 3rd Earl of Peterborough (1713-14) and John, 2nd Viscount Molesworth (1720-5). However, by the eighteenth-century Genoa was essentially a consular post and Parma and Modena had only limited representation. Tuscany had no resident Grand Duke between 1737 and

1765, when Horace Mann was most significant at Florence for his hospitality toward tourists. Indeed, the correspondence of diplomatic representatives throws considerable light on the Grand Tour.

Diplomacy was not taught, but was an adjunct of gentility, a consequence of breeding. Diplomats were the personal representatives of the sovereign, and their readiness for office was seen as a product of their social rank, which was often closely related to the diplomatic rank of the official appointed. Thus, selection was an expression of regard, respect and reciprocity. In 1732, George II sent William, 3rd Earl of Essex, to Turin as Ambassador, the first British envoy to that Court with that rank. In contrast, in 1749, the French were upset that they had been sent an Earl (Albemarle), and not a Duke (Richmond). The failure of France to offer an envoy of equivalent rank was cited as a reason.

Diplomats were rarely career civil servants. Indeed, the career officials in foreign service, the bureaucrats in the offices of the two Secretaries of State, spent their careers in those offices and were not rotated abroad. Instead, diplomats were privileged servants of the Crown. As such, many of their duties related to ceremonial roles. This element may appear anachronistic today, but it was important to the culture of diplomacy in the period, not least in the assertion and affirmation of status at European courts. Greater attention was paid to correct ceremony and diplomatic etiquette when a country found itself in a vulnerable position.

For British rulers, an important example of this occurred as a result of the need to defend their position after the expulsion of the male line of the Stuarts in

1689. The issue was more particularly significant in British relations with Catholic states due to Papal recognition of James II and his successor from 1701, 'James III'. The Popes were not alone. For example, the Pretender's reception in Parma in 1728 infuriated the British government. This issue directs attention to a major aspect of diplomatic culture that receives considerable coverage in the State Papers.

Aside from the question of recognition, the Jacobite issue was security. Indeed, spying on Jacobite exiles and on foreign support for Jacobitism was a major task for the British foreign service. It became, however, far less serious after the major Jacobite defeat at Culloden in 1746 and was even less of an issue after the crushing of the French invasion fleet in 1759 at the battle of Quiberon Bay. This change is a reminder of the extent to which chronological change could impact the situation. Although serious prior to these defeats, Jacobitism was not an issue thereafter.

So also with colonial and commercial elements. While significant throughout, these became more important with Spain from the 1710s and, in the case of colonies, notably North America, with France from the 1750s. A level of expertise was necessary for such issues.

Benjamin Keene, British agent and, eventually, envoy, proved particularly able to offer this in the case of Spain. With France, there were specialists, such as those who negotiated the Dunkirk issue and the Nova Scotia frontier, but, in general, the level of specialisation required for detailed negotiations was provided by the Board of Trade in London. In Italy, consuls offered the necessary expertise to handle matters of trade, particularly in Genoa, Venice and Leghorn (Livorno). Their papers tend to have received insufficient attention, notably by British historians.

State Papers Foreign also offer much of interest on the politics of those foreign states. Diplomats were acute observers of royal views, government trends, court factionalism, and indications of military strength. Their focus was generally Court-centred, as with Keene's account of Philip V of Spain (r. 1700-46), a highly quixotic and unpredictable ruler, but that focus reflected the importance of the Court as the most significant context for foreign policy. In the face of a weak Louis XV, the relationship between key ministers was very much the theme of the reports of James, 1st Earl Waldegrave, from Paris in the 1730s, with the focus on the interaction of Cardinal André-Hercule Fleury, the first minister from 1726 to 1743, and Germain Louis Chauvelin, the Foreign Minister from 1727 to 1737. That, however, did not mean that Waldegrave ignored other political issues. In contrast, Horatio Walpole, his predecessor, provided a different point of access to French political culture. He was closer to more progressive cultural circles. James, Lord Tyrawly at Lisbon lacked Waldegrave's entrées, and his accounts, though valuable, showed the importance of understanding these personal connections: Waldegrave was born a Catholic and had Jacobite links.

These, and other, variations make this a fascinating collection, and also underline its value for a close reading. That *State Papers* provides a prismatic view as well as multiple perspectives helps make it particularly interesting. It is crucial for understanding international relations and, in addition, offers details not only on politics, but also on a rich range of topics including military matters, naval moves, colonial issues, trade, and, more elliptically, social topics including the position of women at court.

NOTES

⁽¹⁾ See Jeremy Black, *British Diplomats and Diplomacy, 1688-1800*, University of Exeter Press (Exeter, 2011), p. 18.

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