

State Papers Online Eighteenth Century, Part IV: Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Turkey - General Overview

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Various source media, State Papers Online



In the seventeenth century, English foreign policy focused on near-neighbours and the challenges they posed: on France, on Spain, the ruler of modern Belgium, and on the Dutch. The geopolitics of Europe and the concerns of what became British foreign policy, however, shifted in the early eighteenth century. In part, this was due to internal factors, notably the Hanoverian succession to the British throne in 1714 and the degree of influence the monarchs then wielded. More significant was the change in European power relations. With Russian troops deployed in Denmark in 1716 and in the German states in 1717, 1735 and 1748, it was the rise of Russia, initially under Peter the Great (r. 1689-1725), that was the most dramatic development. However, this was an aspect of a more general shift of power toward Eastern Europe. In particular, the defeat of the Turks outside Vienna in 1683 was followed by Austria becoming first the power in Hungary and then also the leading Italian power. Indeed, from the 1700s, there was increasing talk of the dangers of Austrian hegemony, talk that was repeated in Britain from the 1710s, reaching a height in 1725-31.^[1] Although not on this scale, Prussian power rose as well, notably under Frederick II, the Great (r. 1740-86).

These geopolitical changes, highly significant in their own right, also had a major impact in Western Europe. They played a role in affecting and even containing French power, and helped make what contemporaries termed the 'balance of power' more complex. Alongside a tendency to treat Eastern Europe as one geopolitical unit, there came many cross-currents, such as those of power-politics which can be followed in subsequent essays.

To understand the new international order it was necessary to have reliable information. The task was

made more complicated for the British government by the lack of alternative means of information or established analytical patterns like those that existed in Western Europe. Indeed, there was a general pattern of ignorance that created particular pressures on the information system aspects of diplomacy. These pressures were exacerbated by the degree to which policy towards Austria, Russia and Prussia became an aspect of domestic political debate from the 1710s.

Diplomatic relations were affected by rifts, most significantly in 1719-30 with Russia, and in 1726-8 with Austria, and with both powers during the Seven Years' War. The absence of conflict, however, meant that the situation was not as serious as it was to be in successive wars with France and Spain.

There were also issues of religion which, as discussed by Andrew Thompson, were particularly strong in the first half of the eighteenth century. Concern in Britain for the plight of Protestants in the *Erblande* (the Habsburg hereditary lands), in the Holy Roman Empire and in Poland was a particularly significant diplomatic issue in the late 1710s and the 1720s. Subsequently, religious antagonism toward an apparently threatening Catholicism contributed to public support for an alliance with Prussia. Frederick II was seen as a Protestant champion.

Another significant sphere was trade, notably in relations with Russia. The negotiation in 1734 of an Anglo-Russian trade treaty, a negotiation that can be followed in the diplomatic papers, prepared the way for a close commercial relationship. However, this alliance became troubled during the American War of Independence (1775-83) due to Catherine the Great's determination to thwart Britain's use of its naval power

to dominate European wartime trade and to determine the claims of neutrals by establishing the League of Armed Neutrality in March 1780.

The collection also reflects the other major geopolitical change of the period, the rise of Britain. In the 1640s and 1685 there was civil war, in 1678-81 an acute constitutional crisis, and in 1688 a successful foreign invasion that touched off a revolution within Britain and conflict in the British Isles. By 1763, in contrast, Britain was a major world empire, indeed the most potent maritime power on the globe.

Clearly, this comparison can be pushed too hard. Domestic opposition and the related threat of foreign invasion remained an element until the crushing defeat of French naval preliminaries in 1759.^[2] Although Jacobitism was not to the fore throughout the period, it was a key element in 1715-16, 1719 and 1744-6. In addition, the domestic rebellion/foreign invading support revived as the key element in the American War of Independence.

These issues all affected Britain's relations with other European powers, both directly and indirectly, and these effects can be followed through the State Papers in this collection. Directly, there were questions about how far Britain could use other issues to win support in its rivalry with France, a question that was particularly to the fore in 1731-56 and 1763-1783. The support ranged from obtaining military assistance to diplomatic co-operation, but all these elements were important. Indirectly, there was the question of the impact on Britain's more general influence in Europe.

There is considerable historiographical debate as to the feasibility of Britain playing the interventionist role on

the Continent that some ministers sought, notably in the late 1710s, the 1740s and the early 1750s, whereas in the 1760s and 1770s a more cautious stance was generally struck. The documents herewith reproduced enable a following of these trends. In particular, it is valuable to read the series in as complete a form as possible as that permits a grasp of the tone of diplomacy. As with other documentary sources, including parliamentary debates, press discussion, and private correspondence, the tone is an important aspect that can be readily lost if attention is only paid to particular documents or to individual correspondents. In particular, reading widely across time enables an understanding of changes in tone and what they signify; while reading widely across place, in other words different series for the same period, permits an appreciation of how foreign policy worked as a whole. It was seen by contemporaries as a multilateral whole, and not as bilateral bits, and is best approached that way, as it is in *State Papers Online Eighteenth Century*.

NOTES

^[1] Austria and Spain signed the Treaty of Vienna on 30 April 1725 by which Austria promised to assist Spain to reacquiring Gibraltar from the British Empire. It was countered by a second Treaty of Vienna of 16 March 1731 between Britain and Austria.

^[2] Britain defeated the French navy in a succession of battles in 1759 culminating in the Battle of Quiberon Bay of 20 November.

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