

# Anglo-Russian Relations, 1714-82

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Various source media, State Papers Online



The nature of Anglo-Russian relations between 1714 and 1782 was such that a broad approach to sources, such as that offered by *State Papers Online: Eighteenth Century Part IV*, is necessary. The main State Papers series on Russia, SP 91, contains the correspondence of the ambassadors and envoys to Russia, however important information can be found in other SP Foreign series as, due to the strains in bilateral relations, it is often the case that key links occurred elsewhere in the diplomatic system.

The general direction of Anglo-Russian relations was one of animosity to alliance and back to animosity. As such, there are parallels with relations between the two states from the late 1940s to the present. Any such diachronic comparisons face many problems, but the significance of searching for 'lessons' from the past has been enhanced by the recent revival of Russian strength and aggressiveness.

The dispute<sup>[1]</sup> between Peter the Great and George I produced an effective breakdown of formal diplomatic contacts for the entire period 1719-30. James Jefferyes, the Minister Resident, left the country. Moreover, British diplomatic representation in Russia in the succeeding decade was a low calibre one, albeit with the exception of the mission of George, Lord Forbes in St Petersburg from June 1733 until 1734. Thomas Ward, Consul-General 1728-30 and Minister Resident from May 1730 until his death in February 1731, was of little importance, similarly Claudius Rondeau, Consul-General 1730-1 and Minister Resident from September 1731 until his death in 1739, was, despite his self-importance, insignificant.

It was only the arrival in June 1740 of Edward Finch MP, with the high rank of Envoy Extraordinary and

Plenipotentiary, and a background of royal favour, diplomatic experience, and the social and courtly skills that went with being a son of an earl, that ushered in a period of high-ranking diplomats such as Sir Cyril Wych (envoy from 1742 to 1744), James, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Tyrawly, and John, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Hyndford, the last envoy in 1744-9.

Finch's official correspondence is particularly significant as his private papers in the Leicestershire Record Office are very disappointing.

Russia was not a pleasant posting. 'Who would marry a man that is going to Petersburg?' complained Wych in 1741.<sup>[2]</sup> Hyndford claimed that his health had been wrecked in Russia. In 1754, Joseph Yorke resisted pressure to go to St Petersburg, while, arriving in Russia in 1758, Robert Keith attempted to leave without success the following year and had to stay until 1762. In 1756-7, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams's links at St Petersburg to the court of the heir, the future Peter III, and his wife Catherine, harmed Anglo-Russian relations. Frederick II, the Great, of Prussia pressed for his recall, although he subsequently changed his mind as he decided that links with the young court would be useful. Hanbury Williams was seen 'more as a Prussian spy than as an English Ambassador'.<sup>[3]</sup>

The rise in Russian power ensured that other states felt threatened and acted as listening posts. For example, in the 1720s, reports from Copenhagen provide copious material on the Russian naval threat and on Russia's menacing support for the Holstein-Gottorp interest against Sweden.

State Papers Prussia repeatedly provides information on Russia, particularly during 1723-6 and 1757-61 when Anglo-Prussian relations were very good, unlike those with Russia. Britain relied on her envoys in Berlin to

supply information on Russian developments. The reports came with glimpses into the attitudes of British diplomats. Thus, in 1720, Charles Whitworth, Britain's envoy to Berlin, wrote, 'the Czar continues to treat the poor Swedes with all the arrogance of an entire and barbarous conqueror. A great part of Europe are like to feel his humour by degrees'.<sup>[4]</sup> Five years later, Charles, 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Townshend, the Secretary of State for the Northern Department, rejected an ideal of Colonel Charles Du Bourgay, Envoy Extraordinary in Berlin, that Britain should support the 'Old Russ' faction in the struggles in St Petersburg, and urged a firm stance towards Russia: 'It is in vain to think of anything real and fair from the Court of Muscovy to our purpose, they never meant honestly in regard to the King [George I], and they are now gone entirely into another interest, and are pursuing with eagerness a quite different scheme'.<sup>[5]</sup>

State Papers, Saxony-Poland (SP 88) is another source that offers insight beyond simply relations with that state. Saxony-Poland played a major role in British attempts to create an anti-Russian alliance, as in the late 1710s. The series can also offer accounts of meetings with Russian diplomats,<sup>[6]</sup> reflections on Anglo-Russian relations and reports on Russian developments. In March 1725, following the death of Peter the Great, Finch reported discontent in Russia and an unpaid army, adding in April: 'they generally think here, that the Czarina [Catherine I] will not be able to maintain herself on the throne at least with that tranquillity which she wishes; the generality of the Muscovites cannot conceal the inclination they have for the Czarowitz [the future Peter II]'.<sup>[7]</sup>

Under Peter the Great (r. 1689-1725), Russia was integrated into European diplomatic practice, with the

establishment of regular diplomatic relations. This represented, as Edward Gibbon pointed out, a major extension of the European international system. Despite the difficulties, Russian postings became important for career diplomats, as with Charles Whitworth who served in St Petersburg from 1705-12. However, his mission was initially almost entirely concerned with commercial matters, which proved far from easy. His experiences negotiating with Peter's ministers on merchants' grievances<sup>[8]</sup> in general and the tobacco trade in particular were both painful and largely unsuccessful. Whitworth suggested that Peter's Westernization policies to turn Russia into a Modern European power were poorly handled as well as unpopular.<sup>[9]</sup>

More generally, the observations made by diplomats are such that State Papers Foreign provide a most valuable account for Russian history in this period, and notably how they struck intelligent observers. The significance of international relations to Russian politics also emerges clearly. Rather than adopting an exclusive *innenpolitik* approach to Russian history, it is necessary to do so alongside the *aussenpolitik* equivalent. This source greatly helps us to do so.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> George I was informed in 1719 of rumours that Peter the Great had supported a Jacobite plot to overthrow him.

<sup>[2]</sup> Wych to Edward Weston, Under Secretary, 8 December 1741, NA. SP 82/63.

<sup>[3]</sup> Andrew Mitchell, envoy in Berlin, to Robert, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Holderness, Secretary of State, 3, 7, 22 June 1756, Hanbury Williams to Holderness, 22 March (quote) 1757, NA. SP 90/65, 91/65.

<sup>[4]</sup> Whitworth to George Tilson, Under Secretary, 1 July 1720, NA. SP 90/15.

<sup>[5]</sup> Townshend to Du Bourgay, 29, 31 October 1725, NA. SP 90/19.

<sup>[6]</sup> For example, Edward Finch to Townshend, 24 March 1725, NA. SP 88/29.

<sup>[7]</sup> Finch to Townshend, 21 March, 4 April 1725, NA. SP 88/29.

<sup>[8]</sup> The Muscovy Company had lost its trading privileges in 1698.

<sup>[9]</sup> J.M. Hartley, *Charles Whitworth: Diplomat in the Age of Peter the Great* (Aldershot, 2002).

# CITATION

Black, Jeremy: "Anglo-Russian Relations, 1714-82." *State Papers Online, Eighteenth Century 1714-1782 (Part IV)*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2018

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