

Britain and the 'Protestant Interest', 1714-1782

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Queen Anne's death in August 1714 was significant in a variety of ways. In foreign policy terms, her reign had been dominated by conflict with Louis XIV over the future occupancy of the Spanish thrones. Both the political and intellectual impact of this struggle continued to resonate into the Hanoverian period. Moreover, the arrival on the British thrones of a new German dynasty reinforced the trend that had existed since the Glorious Revolution of increased British involvement in continental politics. While this process of dynastic transition is now commonly referred to as the 'Hanoverian succession', the language that contemporaries used was indicative of their priorities – for them, the 'Protestant succession' was the preferred description.

Confession still mattered in eighteenth-century politics for a number of reasons. The English state had defined itself since at least the sixteenth century in contradistinction to its Catholic continental counterparts. In the seventeenth century, concerns about the direction of ecclesiastical policy had been an important contributory factor to the internal conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s. Likewise, fears that the Stuarts were pursuing policies that favoured 'popery and arbitrary government' had helped ensure the removal of James II and VII in 1688 and the prospect of a Stuart return in Scotland hastened the path towards union in 1707. The Act of Settlement (1701), which had been introduced to deal with Anne's paucity of heirs, made adherence to protestant belief a necessary condition of taking the throne, while excluding more than fifty of Anne's nearer blood relations from the line of succession.

Politically and rhetorically, therefore, it made sense for the new dynasty to stress its protestant credentials.

Given that diplomacy in this period relied heavily on the projection of status and position, it is unsurprising that aspects of this protestant emphasis were visible within this sphere too. For example, George I's German diplomats quickly incorporated 'Schützer des Glaubens' (Defender of the Faith) into the royal titles they listed at the start of their correspondence. Ironically, it had been granted to Henry VIII by the papacy for his attacks on Martin Luther's early works, but it was repurposed subsequently. This emphasis on the British monarch as a 'Defender of the Faith' was part of a perception that had grown that the British state had a particular and providential role to play within European politics.¹¹

To understand why this was important it is necessary to think more broadly about some of the assumptions and attitudes that coloured the ways in which many people at various levels of British society thought about how politics worked. Much work has been done to show how Protestantism was an important component of national identity in this period and one aspect of this was the analogy that could be drawn between the Old Testament Israelites and the modern British as a chosen or elect people. While the elect might on occasion suffer for their sins (and it was possible to interpret some of the trials and tribulations brought about by the later Stuarts in this light), they also had a particular role to play in defending their co-religionists from the evils of Catholic persecution. Historically, this might have entailed seeking to curb the might of Catholic Spain but, by the late seventeenth century, the most serious threat to Protestantism across Europe was viewed to emanate from Louis XIV's France. This sense of threat was reinforced by the series of conflicts that Britain fought with France under William III (the Nine Years' War, 1688-97) and then under Anne (the

War of the Spanish Succession, 1702-13). Although there were periods after 1714 when Anglo-French relations improved, such as 1715-31 where war-weariness and the minority of Louis XV were significant contributory factors, suspicions of French intentions and aspirations remained endemic.^[2]

William III set a pattern, which was continued under Anne, as to how best to contain French power. To prevent Louis XIV's expansion into a position of hegemony across Europe, an alliance system of powers with a mutual interest in stopping French dominance was deemed to be the best solution. The alliance system itself could contain both Protestant and Catholic powers, indeed the Holy Roman Emperor and his Habsburg domains were central to it, but part of the motivation behind the alliance was the need to prevent something that was deemed to be a natural and inherent characteristic of unchecked Catholic power namely the desire to dominate and control. In contemporary parlance, such an alliance system was designed to prevent the aspirations that Catholic powers had towards 'Universal monarchy' and, by contrast, it was supposed to maintain ideas such as the 'balance of power', the 'liberties of Europe' and the 'protestant interest'. There is an interesting difference visible here in terms of how it was assumed different players within the states system would act. While it was thought that Catholics still posed an existential threat to other Protestant states and, given half a chance, would seek to overcome them, Protestants were deemed to be operating within a more rational world where calculations were based around perceptions of mutual self-interest.

It is necessary to set the context from the later seventeenth century in such detail because the

longevity of this world-view was considerable. Many of the politicians and diplomats working for the British state in the mid-eighteenth century had inherited their assumptions from the world as it was when they were young. To give just one example of this tendency, the idea that Britain, Austria and the other members of the Grand Alliance that had been formed to fight against Louis during the War of the Spanish Succession had some natural affinity with each other was reflected in the idea of an 'Old System' which it was in Britain's best interests to defend. The impact of the ideas of the 'Protestant Interest' on British diplomatic practice after 1714 was varied. It might entail simply the idea that the bonds created by a common set of religious ideals would be a useful starting point for any discussion of a potential alliance. At various times, British diplomats sent to negotiate treaties with both the Danish and Swedish crowns sought to build on a sense of common Protestantism to further their efforts (SP 44/280 Stanhope to Carteret and Polwarth, 28 July 1720 is one example of this).

Yet it was through British diplomatic activity with both Prussia and Saxony-Poland that an emphasis on the importance of religious ties was most visible. Some of the reasons for this related to the politics of Protestantism within the Holy Roman Empire. Both Brandenburg and Saxony were early protectors of Protestants within the Empire. Hanover had only been raised to electoral status in the 1690s but Saxony's credentials as the natural leader of German Protestantism had been somewhat diminished by the conversion of Augustus II to Catholicism in 1697 in order to ensure his accession to the Polish throne. This meant that the Elector of Brandenburg, who had become King in Prussia in 1702, and the Electors of

Hanover, who became British monarchs in 1714, could use their Protestant credentials as a means to compete with Saxony in central Europe and incidents such as the one that occurred at Thorn, or Torun, in Polish Prussia in 1724 were an ideal way to do this.

The incident in question arose from scuffles during a Catholic parade that quickly escalated into a more serious riot. The Jesuits in Thorn, unhappy at what they viewed as the tardiness of the town's authorities in quelling the disturbances, appealed to the Polish parliament, the Sejm. The Sejm confiscated one of the town's Protestant churches and handed it over to the Jesuits. They also sentenced the mayor and several other town officials to death for their supposed failures in dealing with the initial riot. Incredulity at the behaviour of the Sejm shifted to anger in Protestant Europe when the sentences were carried out in early December. Aside from attracting considerable attention in the public sphere, the incident created diplomatic ripples. Not only was the British extraordinary envoy in Berlin, Colonel Charles Du Bourgay, petitioned to exert British diplomatic influence on behalf of the town (SP 90/18 28 November 1724 and 17 February 1725) but a British diplomat was even sent to Augustus's court, first at Dresden and then in Warsaw, to ensure that the government had detailed information about the unfolding of the crisis (SP 81/174 and SP 88/29 and 30 has the relevant dispatches).

As in other cases, the invocation of Protestant Interests when it came to dealing with what was happening in Poland was one piece in a larger diplomatic jigsaw. Just as mention of the need to prevent persecution might be used to reinforce the impression of moral superiority,^[3] there was often also an element of attempting to justify action (or inaction) on the basis of

previous international agreements as well (in the Thorn case, the 1667 Treaty of Oliva was deemed to provide the grounds on which interference in the internal arrangements of another state could be justified). More generally, the defence of the Westphalian settlement (particularly its religious aspects) was seen as important in a period in which princely conversions seemed to be tipping the balance in favour of Catholics in central Europe.^[4]

The complexities of using a combination of moral, legal and cultural pressure to build sound diplomatic arrangements can also be seen in aspects of Britain's relations with Prussia in this period. While George II (r. 1727-1760) and Frederick William I of Prussia (r. 1713-1740) were brothers-in-law and fierce rivals, George II hoped that the accession of his nephew, Frederick II (r. 1740-1786) might enable him to display some avuncular leadership, given his senior status. Consequently, British diplomats were keen to emphasise protestant solidarity during the early days of the new king's reign (SP 43/25 Harrington to Trevor 29 June 1740 and Harrington to Newcastle 6 July 1740).

Yet the principle of Protestant unity was to feature more prominently in the last years of George II's reign. The mid-1750s were turbulent years for the European states system, as the established powers, Britain, France and Austria, struggled to deal with the rise of Prussia and Russia. Anglo-French conflicts in America and south Asia fused with struggles between Prussia and Austria in central Europe to create a pan-European conflict. Britain and Prussia were allies during the Seven Years War and it suited both governments to portray the struggle as being fought against the evils of Catholic tyranny and to prevent the rise of an Austro-French universal monarchy that would seek to disrupt

both the balance of power and the Protestant interest. Frederick II, in particular, was portrayed as a Protestant hero within the British press.

Frederick's personal religious convictions were, of course, far from orthodox. Yet the perception of working towards a common aim could be just as important as the reality. More generally, the idea that it was important to play up Britain's Protestant credentials varied considerably over time. In the immediate aftermath of 1714, it made sense for the new Hanoverian dynasty to use all the tools at its disposal to legitimate itself, particularly against the Jacobite threat of the exiled Stuart monarchy seeking a restoration from the continent and succeeding in large-scale domestic rebellions in 1715 and 1745. Consequently, emphasising their own Protestantism provided a means not just to justify their own rule but also to undermine the claims of the rival Catholic Stuart claimants. In a slightly different way, an emphasis on the Hanoverians' Protestant credentials was a means to distract from their foreignness. Thus, as the dynasty became more closely identified with their new homeland, the need to stress their Protestantism diminished. By 1760, with the first of the Hanoverians born in Britain now on the throne in the shape of George III, the frequency of invoking the Protestant Interest as an important characteristic of British diplomatic culture was much reduced. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find occasional references to the themes of Protestant solidarity and the need to defend the rights of Protestants abroad during George III's reign as well. However, as the Jacobite threat diminished, so too did the need to portray the monarchy simply through a confessional lens.

George III, in common with many of his own subjects, often saw the world around him as demonstrating the workings of divine providence. One instance of this can be seen in the widely held belief in the 1780s that the loss of the American colonies was the result of divine displeasure and that the way to ensure that such a calamitous event would not recur was through a programme of domestic moral improvement. Yet the assumptions that lay behind this confessional lens were more widespread and it is unsurprising that traces of these views can be found more widely dispersed within British diplomatic correspondence. While there were occasions when the defence of the 'Protestant Interest' was articulated as being part of a set of specific policy aims, more frequently it could be seen as operating as part of a range of assumptions that helped to shape decision-making. If its visibility varied over time, it was, nevertheless, part of the intellectual furniture.

NOTES

^[1] Memorial of Friedrich Bonet. London, 26 December 1717. SP 100/14 f.577.

^[2] Cyril Wych to Carteret. St Petersburg, 27 April 1743. SP 91/34 f.221.

^[3] Charles Whitworth to Lord Townshend, 5 January 1717. SP 90/7/192.

^[4] Holderness to Mitchell. Whitehall, 14 May 1756. SP 90/65 f.16.

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