

Bismarck's Favourite Englishman: Lord Odo Russell's Mission to Berlin

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In a recent article on the relationship between Sir Alexander Malet, Britain's minister plenipotentiary to the German Confederation at Frankfurt from 1852 to 1866, and Otto von Bismarck, Prussia's delegate to this assembly for much of that period, W. A. Van't Padje has suggested that 'the exceptionally personal and close friendship which [Sir Alexander] had enjoyed with the Iron Chancellor in the eighteen-fifties remains ... a rare example of a cordial Anglo-German political relationship in the nineteenth century.'⁽¹⁾ In the light of Karina Urbach's book on the Berlin ambassadorship of Lord Odo Russell, this conclusion seems somewhat questionable. If it is Van't Padje's contention that Bismarck delighted in unusually frank discussion with Sir Alexander and preferred his company to that of his other foreign colleagues, then, on the basis of Dr Urbach's book, the same could be said to an even greater extent about the relationship between Bismarck and Lord Odo Russell. Indeed, from his appointment as ambassador in 1871 through to his death in situ in 1884, Odo Russell seems to have been the doyen of the Berlin diplomatic corps, possessing exceptional access to the chancellor and being able to take part in some surprisingly informal repartee. It would seem, therefore, that notwithstanding the Bismarck-Malet relationship so carefully unearthed by Van't Padje, Dr Urbach is correct in attributing to Lord Odo Russell, rather than to Sir Alexander Malet, the designation 'Bismarck's favourite Englishman'. And, yet, what does this signify?

In drawing the reader's attention to these two contributions to the study of Anglo-German relations with their contrasting judgements about the identity of the British diplomat most amenable to Bismarck, it is not my intention to judge the relative merits of their arguments. Nor do I wish to stress the differences between Van't Padje's and Urbach's conclusions, much less to imply that a new historical controversy has come into

existence. Quite the contrary, in fact. The near-simultaneous publication of the article on Sir Alexander Malet and the monograph on Lord Odo Russell illustrate instead, to my mind, the emergence of a promising new form of inquiry into the Second Reich: namely, the Germany that emerges through the prism of that privileged external observer, the British diplomat. Both Sir Alexander Malet and Lord Odo Russell, principally by virtue of their rank and position, but also as a result of their unusual intimacy with Bismarck described by these authors, were afforded the opportunity to scrutinize the development of German affairs from a perspective enjoyed by few others. The implications of this possibility are alluded to intriguingly in Van't Padje's article, but form the very heart of Dr Urbach's study. Indeed, it is made very clear from the outset (pp. 1-2) that it is Odo's very foreignness – a characteristic that provides him with large-scale immunity from the emotional extremes with which many Germans viewed (and still view) Bismarck – that makes Odo's reports about Germany so valuable in Dr Urbach's historical judgement. This is not to say that she makes the mistake of thinking that Odo was objective: rather she believes that his subjectivity was not so immediate as it was for Bismarck's German contemporaries and, thus, that he was able to perceive political developments in Germany in a manner not open to them. As a result, her book has the potential to add to our understanding of Odo Russell, the mechanics of British diplomacy in general, Anglo-German relations in particular, and also to provide new insights into Germany itself. It is in this context that it needs to be considered.

As is so often the case these days, it must be stated at the outset that research has been undertaken in this area before. If we broaden the frame of reference in this respect to diplomats in general, rather than just to those of British origin, then it should be noted that the image of Germany that appears in the reports and correspondence of American diplomats in Europe is currently a subject of much investigation by, amongst others, Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, Frank Trommler, and, not entirely coincidentally, by this reviewer.⁽²⁾ In a similar fashion, the perceptions of British commentators on Germany have also been subject to evaluation. Works by the likes of Raymond James Sontag and Paul M. Kennedy have, for example, focused on the popular and diplomatic perceptions behind the deterioration of Anglo-German relations from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.⁽³⁾ Moreover, with the publication of such primary sources as the diary of Sir Edward Goschen, British Ambassador in Berlin from 1908 to 1914, it cannot be maintained that the views of British diplomats in Germany have been entirely ignored.⁽⁴⁾ Yet, at the same time, and despite all of the above, it is not only the case that there is plenty of scope for new works in this area, but it is also true that the monograph by Karina Urbach makes a decided and very useful contribution to this subject.

To begin with, while much of the work on external perceptions of the Second Reich has focused principally, if not entirely, on the two decades prior to the outbreak of the First World War, Dr Urbach concentrates instead on the less extensively scrutinized period of the decade following the Reichsgründung. As a result, her work goes some way towards making good the deficit regarding recent scholarly accounts of how resident external observers viewed the Second Reich immediately after its foundation.

No less significant is her decision to focus on the outlook of a British diplomat. At first glance, given the multitude of contributions to the study of Anglo-German relations, it might seem that Dr Urbach has entered a crowded field. Yet, a great many of the works on British diplomatic relations with Germany, such as the recent biography of Eyre Crowe ⁽⁵⁾, take as their starting point the activities of the centre, namely those of the Foreign Office or Cabinet. In these volumes, the reports of Britain's overseas representatives are generally evaluated, not on their own terms, but in the light of how they were received back in Whitehall. This contrasts markedly with the recent corpus of material on American perceptions of Germany, which, on the whole, do not prioritize the views of the State Department. Indeed, as a recent collection of essays has demonstrated, the American perspective is often evaluated on a more wide-ranging basis, with emphasis on those Americans on the ground.⁽⁶⁾ Dr Urbach's study of Lord Odo Russell and her consideration of his view of Germany, rather than just his influence over Whitehall policy-making, represents a useful shift in this direction in studies of the nature of British perceptions of Germany.

Finally, and following directly from this, it should also be said that Dr Urbach's focus is on a figure who has not been subject to the historical scrutiny that one might argue he deserves. Indicative of this is the fact that, although written in the late 1930s, Winifried Taffs' biography of Lord Odo Russell is still the best-known

published account. This circumstance, on its own, would justify a renewed examination of his character and views.

Having said all of the above, it is of course true that identifying an important topic and writing a good book about it are not always the same thing. Consequently, while there are sound reasons for holding out high expectations for this volume, the question remains: does it deliver all that it promises? I suspect that for many readers the answer to this question will depend heavily on the type of history they enjoy. Bismarck's Favourite Englishmen is a sharp and well-written – at times, even witty – examination of the views of Lord Odo Russell. It combines clear analysis with amusing vignettes. It is, however, resolute in examining Germany principally in terms of high politics. This stance, which pleases this reviewer, but which will not be universally welcomed, is in part the unavoidable consequence of the outlook and interests of the book's subject. As Dr Urbach makes clear, Odo Russell, born into the aristocratic family headed by the Duke of Bedford, was, in his understanding of economics, a typical product of such a class background. 'It is ironic,' she records on p.102, 'that Russell, a child of the "century of commerce" did not know much about business.' This 'irony', while certainly not limited to Odo alone, undoubtedly circumscribed the range of his reporting. On the whole, and despite his prediction of the 1873 crash (p.77), one will search his reports in vain for detailed analyses of Germany's remarkable economic development in this period. However, in his area of expertise, namely German high politics, Odo's views certainly bear scrutiny.

In domestic matters, Odo's tenure of office coincided with the establishment and early development of the political structures of the new Empire, as well as with the waging of the *Kulturkampf* and the introduction of protective tariffs. The last point, being largely an economic issue, did not loom large in Odo's understanding, but he did comment extensively on the other two developments. At the heart of his explanation was an emphasis on the importance of personality. As he informed a young Arthur Nicolson at a ball attended by Kaiser Wilhelm I, Moltke, Roon and Bismarck, 'There you can observe the makers of modern Germany.' (p. 99) Yet, if Odo was a strong believer in the role of the individual in history, he often advanced views that would have found favour with 1970s advocates of the German *Sonderweg*. In what reads like shades of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Bismarck was depicted by Odo Russell as a 'Machiavellian' (p. 90) figure who manipulated his Emperor as readily as he manipulated the parliament and people. Hence, at one level, by virtue of his ability to dominate the Kaiser – be it by argument, threats of resignation, or simply by sowing the seeds of discord and division within the imperial family – Bismarck appeared in Odo's correspondence as comparable to Wallenstein, the most famous of all overmighty subjects. Yet, at other times, Odo saw Bismarck as a more reactionary figure, who sought to protect the rights of Crown and Army, and threatened to 'blow up the constitution' (p. 152) in a *Staatsstreich*, if the democratically elected Reichstag dared to block his proposals. And then there was Bismarck's crusade against the Catholic Church, the *Kulturkampf*. Odo regarded this campaign as an exercise in futility: how, after all, does one fight a belief system? Accordingly, his explanation for why Bismarck embarked upon this policy was fundamentally one of political strategy. Odo, who had long since come to realise that a vast gap existed between British and German conceptions of Liberalism – 'German Liberals do not appear to me to know what liberty means' he wrote (quoted on p.157) – saw the *Kulturkampf* as Bismarck's means of cementing in place his alliance with the National Liberal Party, whose members saw the Catholic Church as a dangerous 'ancient superstition' that needed to be fought. Many modern historians would agree with this assessment of Bismarck's motivation, as they would with Odo's belief that little was achieved by the whole *Kulturkampf* movement beyond the creation of the sort of mass hysteria in which members of the public could seriously believe that the death of the Berlin Zoo's most popular lion was the intended outcome of a Jesuit conspiracy.(p. 160) In this, as in many matters about the German domestic scene, Odo had hit the nail squarely on the head.

Odo's role in Anglo-German relations is better known than his views about German internal affairs and, for this reason, it was probably inevitable that Dr Urbach would find it harder on this issue to bring so much new material to the reader's attention. That said, her study confirms the importance of Odo Russell in the negotiations over the eastern question in 1870 and also reminds us that he was not an unimportant figure at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Of course, she cannot avoid acknowledging that he misjudged Bismarck's colonial intentions in 1884 and that he was convinced, incorrectly, that Germany was hostile to Austria in

the 1870s. However, this book is not intended as an apology for Lord Odo Russell, but as a record of his ambassadorship, and his embassy produced some judgements ahead of its time. Under Odo's watchful eye, for example, General Walker, the Military Attaché, recorded the interest among German army officers in the possibility of an invasion of the British Isles (p. 115) and, thus, provided a foretaste of the 'bolt from the blue' scares that would be so prevalent around 1907. Walker was also prescient in anticipating the emergence of Russo-German hostility (p. 124), a prediction that would prove all too accurate.

In summation, I would like to focus on one final historical detail explored in this book. In 1878, Odo was offered a peerage by Disraeli's Conservative administration. Although desirous of accepting, he was persuaded to turn down this honour on the grounds that as a member of a Whig family he should not accept a peerage from a rival political party. As a result, it would not be until Gladstone's return to office that Odo was finally elevated to the title of Baron Amphil. This little insight into British domestic political and constitutional matters demonstrates the breadth of this study. It validates once again, as does the whole book, the point that, in the life of the individual, the general is illustrated in the particular.

Notes

1. W. A. Van't Padje, 'Sir Alexander Malet and Prince Otto von Bismarck: an almost forgotten Anglo-German friendship', *Historical Research*, 72 (1999), 285-300, on p. 300.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Contributions on this topic can be found in Hans-Jürgen Schröder (ed.), *Confrontation and Cooperation: German and the United States in the Era of World War I, 1900-1924* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993); Matthew Seligmann, 'Germany and the origins of the First World War in the eyes of the American diplomatic establishment', *German History*, 15 (1997), 307-32.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Raymond James Sontag, *Germany and England: Background of Conflict, 1848-1894* (New York: Norton, 1969); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Christopher H. D. Howard (ed.), *The Diary of Edward Goschen 1900-1914* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Sibyl Crowe and Edward Corp, *Our Ablest Public Servant: Sir Eyre Crowe 1864-1925* (Braunton: Merlin Books, 1993).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase & Jürgen Heideking (eds), *Zwei Wege in die Moderne: Aspekte der deutsch-Amerikanischen Beziehungen 1900-1918* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1998).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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