

Royalty and Diplomacy in Europe, 1890-1914

Review Number:

194

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 May, 2001

Author:

Roderick McLean

Date of Publication:

2001

Pages:

251pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Dominic Lieven

The aim of Roderick McLean's book is to assert the continuing importance of monarchs in European politics in the decades immediately before 1914. His choice of diplomacy as the sphere in which to test this proposition is of course "unfair", since of all areas of governmental activity foreign policy was the one in which the monarchs played the most active role. On the other hand, in these pre-war years foreign policy was immensely important, so if monarchs played a major role in its making then their overall political significance cannot be denied. McLean chooses Britain, Germany and Russia as his case studies on the principle that all three were monarchies and great powers. In addition, since these three countries span the whole range of European monarchy from the most constitutional (Britain) to the most absolutist (Russia), they provide a balanced view of royalty's overall significance.

This book is written against historians who deny the importance of personalities and politics in history, and who stress instead the significance of long-term structural factors. A more specific target are historians of modern Europe dismissive of the continuing importance of pre-modern elements in politics down to 1914 and even beyond. This is to support the argument first put forward twenty years ago by Arno Meyer in his *Persistence of the Old Regime*. An additional target are those historians who more or less deny the importance of foreign policy or diplomacy, seeing them as merely the domestic class war waged by other means.

McLean's book is divided into four chapters. The last covers royal visits in Anglo-German relations between 1906 and 1914. The chapter's title, "the limits of dynastic diplomacy", accurately conveys the author's sensible view that these visits had little impact on the relations between the two countries. The surface amiability of these visits, and the pomp and circumstance that surrounded them did, however, give a false impression to the politically naïve (in other words most of the British population) that Anglo-German relations were not too dangerously strained and that the concert of royal cousins remained a bulwark of European peace. In that sense these visits were quite useful to the key ministers in the Liberal government as they strove to build an anti-German coalition while assuaging their back-benchers' dislike of Realpolitik (e.g.

the alliance with tsarism) and fear of war.

Another conclusion of this chapter is that whatever historians may have felt on the subject, William II had no doubts about the overwhelming importance of monarchs in the making of foreign policy. His wild and sometimes hysterical over-estimate of the role played by Edward VII meant, for example, that the failure of Buckingham Palace to send birthday greetings to the German Empress could spark off panic in William's mind about an impending British attack on his beloved fleet. A foreign policy influenced by someone with so very skewed an understanding of political realities was bound to be dangerous. Nicholas II overestimated the power and misjudged the views of some of his fellow monarchs but never to William's grossly exaggerated degree.

McLean points out in his chapter on Anglo-German dynastic antagonism that at the beginning of his reign Edward VII was actually less anti-German than British public opinion, just as William was far less Anglophobe than most of his subjects. Though Edward's views changed, above all during and after the first Moroccan crisis, he usually tried to ensure that his poor personal relations with William did not further complicate the already dangerously strained relationship between the two countries. The King mattered because of his role in top diplomatic appointments and because he alone had automatic access to his fellow monarchs, and above all Tsar Nicholas. His tact and diplomatic skill helped to reassure both the French and the Russians of Britain's commitment to the entente.

In contrast to his relatively modest and surely realistic view on Edward's role, McLean asserts the overwhelming importance of Emperor William in the decline of Anglo-German relations. In his view, the creation of a formidable navy was the key to this antagonism and the Emperor was both the fleet's main backer and the greatest obstacle to any agreement with Britain on the limitation of naval armaments.

Here one comes to the core of the debate about monarchical power before 1914. Most historians see Germany as the greatest threat to European stability in these years and as the country most responsible for turning the July 1914 crisis into a European war. If, as is surely right, the navy was the key issue in Anglo-German antagonism, to what extent was the navy the outgrowth of the Kaiser's personal policy and perceptions rather than of deeper structural factors? To come to a conclusion on this issue, however, one needs a broader perspective than that of purely diplomatic history.

It seems to me that the enormous growth of German overseas trade in itself made some degree of naval expansion likely. A very important element in German wealth was now vulnerable to interdiction by the Royal Navy in any crisis when London wished to bring pressure on Berlin. Belief in the overwhelming importance of colonies for a great power's survival was very widespread in Europe and the United States before 1914. From Herzen and de Tocqueville in the first half of the century to Leroy-Beaulieu and Seeley at its close, it was very generally believed that only states of continental scale had any chance of holding their own as great powers in the twentieth century. Mahan put a fashionable naval twist on this common view but it was in any case clear from the history of the last two centuries that it was far easier to build empire outside Europe than within it. That was why the great empires had been created by Europe's peripheral powers, Spain, Britain and Russia.

At the turn of the century, as the Americans grabbed the remnants of the Spanish empire, Britain seized the geopolitical and economic core of southern Africa and Russia moved forward seemingly inexorably in east Asia, the Germans had good reason to feel hard-done-by. The calm cheek with which the British and French then proceeded to carve up North Africa, throwing tasty morsels to Spain and eventually Italy while largely ignoring Germany, could justifiably be seen as an affront. Germany's peers seemed to have no inhibitions about using naked force and aggression to grab control of key areas of the globe. Why should she act differently and how could she assert her right to a place in the carve-up of the world unless she had a formidable fleet?

In my view these arguments were at least as important as domestic politics in explaining the building of the German fleet. Nevertheless, it is clear that the navy did play a very useful domestic role from the perspective

of Germany's rulers. Since the ruling classes were (by Russian, Spanish or Italian standards quite unnecessarily) unprepared to come to terms with Social Democracy and Germany itself was also fractured along confessional and regional lines, the navy was a very handy means to gain legitimacy for the regime and create a powerful coalition in support of conservative and liberal-conservative governments.

As regards the fleet, it therefore seems to me that there were powerful structural reasons to build it, though I would place rather more weight on international factors than has generally been done by historians in the last four decades. Nevertheless, the unrealistic assumptions about British reactions and German financial possibilities which lay behind the fleet's creation have in part to be blamed on William. Both he and Bulow simply ruled out the possibility of an Anglo-Russian rapprochement because both men were seemingly blind to how Germany's actions might appear to others. Moreover, once the Triple Entente had become a reality William did remain a key obstacle to coming to terms with Britain on naval expansion, despite the increasingly obvious fact that Germany could not afford to match the British construction programme.

Certainly German public opinion was often xenophobic and hysterical, and society was harder to manipulate and lead than had been the case under Bismarck. German society too must take responsibility for the Reich's increasing isolation in Europe. This does not mean, however, that the Kaiser had no room for manoeuvre or that he can be absolved of responsibility for the disaster that he brought on his own people and Europe in 1914. McLean's basic point, namely that William's personality and role deserve careful study, therefore seems to me correct.

The same is true as regards Nicholas II. The obvious example of the tsar's importance as regards foreign policy is the Tsar's personal role in the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. As McLean rightly points out, by 1902-3 the ministers of foreign affairs, war and finance would all have settled for a deal with Tokyo that balanced concessions over Korea for pre-eminence in Manchuria. It was Nicholas who overruled them, partly because he underestimated the strength and determination of Japan. In addition, although the Emperor denied his ministers the possibility to run policy towards Japan, he did not fill the resulting gap himself. The result was delayed and incoherent policy-making which persuaded the Japanese that the Russians were merely playing for time. Since Japan's programme of naval construction was complete by January 1904 while Russia's required another year, this suspicion was natural and was an additional spur to action for the Japanese government.

The hole in the centre of government in Nicholas's reign applied to much more than the run-up to the war with Japan. Throughout his reign the Emperor remained unable to play the coordinating and policy-initiating roles of chief executive officer while refusing to allow anyone else to do the job for long. In this he was reminiscent of Louis XVI. The situation in Germany was not as serious because the chancellor was in a position to coordinate all branches of the civilian government. Even in Germany, however, the emperor's position as supreme warlord, together with William II's inability to play this role responsibly, did mean that military and civilian policy was not properly coordinated. This was very important in July 1914 and even more so in the winter of 1916-17.

The Japanese Meiji constitution was modelled on that of imperial Germany and shared its weaknesses. Before 1914 coordination and leadership was exercised informally by an extra-constitutional body, the so-called Genro, or council of Meiji-era elder statesmen. Once the latter had died out, the army, navy, diplomatic and domestic political leaderships went their own ways, with disastrous consequences in the 1930s. Given the political traditions of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the great political acumen of some Hohenzollern monarchs, it was not wholly unrealistic to expect the Kaiser to act as chief executive officer of his government. Japanese political culture and the traditions of the Japanese monarchy made it inconceivable that a Japanese emperor should do so.

Even a Frederick II might have found it hard to serve as lifelong head of state and chief executive officer of government under modern conditions, however. Part of the problem lay in the growth of a large, vocal and impatient public opinion, together with parliaments, newspapers and other aspects of civil society through which it could express itself. Both Nicholas II and William II fell victim to this aspect of modernity in rather

similar fashion. Politicians who wished to drive the monarch out of active politics used press and parliament to expose scandals at court. The Rasputin and Eulenberg affairs had much in common. If the Rasputin affair proved more fatal, that was above all because in Russia political stability rested more completely than in Germany on the monarchy alone.

By the turn of the twentieth century government was far bigger and more complicated than had been the case even half a century before. Even if monarchs had been surrounded by the sort of secretariats which support a contemporary head of government, they would have found lifelong service in this role to be more than the human frame is designed to bear. Contemporary heads of government are professional politicians who prove their capacity to bear the rigours of executive office by years of survival and advancement in public life. Even so, very few serve more than a decade in top office. By contrast, not merely was a monarch chosen by fate and brought up in the very rarefied world of the imperial palace, by the late nineteenth century rules of succession were strict and palace coups no longer existed (save in Serbia) as a means to correct accidents of heredity.

An interesting sidelight on this issue is presented by the history of imperial China. There a mature monarch might be able to choose the most competent of his many sons to succeed him on the throne, as the Emperor Kangxi chose Yongzheng in the 1720s. As Beatrice Bartlett makes clear in her splendid study of Ching government (*Monarchs and Ministers. The Grand Council in Mid Chhing China 1723-1820*), few monarchs have equalled either Yongzheng's competence or his devotion to duty. The Emperor faced many decisions of great technical complexity, such as for example the difficulties of projecting and supplying military power in Central Asia, a thousand miles or more from the empire's core. Not coincidentally, Yongzheng died relatively young, commenting that 'one man's strength is not sufficient to run the Empire'.

The point about China was that here developed the world's oldest and most complicated system of bureaucratic government. All the frustrations experienced by the last Romanov tsars as they battled with a growing bureaucracy had long since been encountered by their Chinese counterparts. However much they hated their bureaucracy, no Romanov ever went on strike against it as the Ming Emperor Wanli did for decades in the sixteenth century. So perhaps for Nicholas II and William II the problem in this case was less modernity than bureaucracy. In fact, parliaments, public opinion and the rule of law offered a monarch of great political skill and flexibility weapons for managing bureaucracy that a Chinese emperor could not possess. But neither William II nor Nicholas II were men of great political skill or mental agility. Moreover, to do them justice, the sheer volume and complexity of government business, not to mention the strain of managing increasingly literate and demanding civil societies, made their task even more difficult than that of Yongzheng.

Where foreign policy was concerned, however, a monarch could hope to manage the volume of paper and the officials, and might well feel himself competent to play a leading role. Is Roderick McClean right therefore to assert that Nicholas II was the key figure in the making of Russian foreign policy, and specifically policy towards Germany?

One way to answer this question is to think counter-factually. Could Nicholas II have got away with shifting foreign policy decisively away from the French alliance and towards agreement with Germany? Such a policy would undoubtedly have further isolated the regime from educated society, in which Germany was disliked and the French alliance was popular. A shift would have been opposed by most diplomatic and military leaders. The diplomats saw the French alliance as an essential source of leverage in a continent overshadowed by German power. The generals viewed it as the foundation of Russian security in the event of war. A pro-slav and pro-entente foreign policy was one plank in Stolypin's effort to build bridges to educated society after 1906. But the Russian army was basically loyal and apolitical. The public cared far more about internal than foreign policy in peacetime. Able diplomats and politicians could have been found who would have supported a rapprochement with Germany.

Therefore it seems plausible to argue, especially before 1905 but probably even afterwards, that Nicholas could have shifted Russian foreign policy back towards Germany for a time at least and survived. Certainly

he could have tried to do so. This was after all a man who obstinately refused to grant constitutional concessions to public opinion and in the process, by 1916, had isolated himself not just from society but also from the majority of his own leading civil and military officials. Convinced that autocracy was the only possible system of government capable of avoiding social revolution and the empire's disintegration, Nicholas clung to this belief in the face of enormous pressure to change his mind. A major shift in foreign policy would certainly not have required more obstinacy or moral courage than this.

The last tsar's critics would no doubt argue that obstinately clinging to his father's line on autocracy was one thing, possessing the initiative and intelligence fundamentally to change Russia's foreign policy quite another. But one should not over-stress the stupidity of Russia's last monarch. There was a perfectly rational (though maybe mistaken) argument that until the socio-economic foundations of liberalism were stronger the weakening of the autocratic police state was very dangerous. Nor are huge, multi-ethnic empires created by conquest easily preserved by the free consent of their many nationalities in the modern age.

Equally rational and comprehensible to Nicholas II were the bases of Russian foreign policy bequeathed by his father, which rested above all on the alliance with France. In fact Nicholas never wavered in his support for the alliance. In the first years of the twentieth century, when relations with Germany were good and Anglo-Russian relations at their nadir, Nicholas dreamed at times of turning the Franco-Russian alliance into a continental league which would include Germany. Serge Witte among other Russians dreamed the same dream. The abortive Treaty of Bjorkoe was the highpoint of this tendency. But when it was pointed out to the Tsar that hopes of a continental league were for the moment a chimera and that the price of alliance with Germany would be the collapse of the link with Paris, he gave way.

It seems to me therefore that there is much truth in Roderick McLean's view of the crucial importance of the monarch to Russian foreign policy in general and Russo-German relations in particular. In negative terms, Russia's defeat by Japan, for which Nicholas bore major responsibility, undermined the European balance of power and was responsible for many of the tensions that underlay international relations between 1906 and 1914: Russia's humiliation allowed the Central Powers the opportunity to throw their weight around for a time, and then encouraged an enormous and de-stabilising Russian effort to rebuild its armed forces and re-assert its international position.

In more narrow terms, Nicholas was crucial to maintaining the French alliance and then strengthening the Triple Entente because he kept in power ministers of foreign affairs who supported this policy. Of course the Emperor played a smaller day-to-day role in policy-making than his foreign minister. But no major policy was initiated without his consent and a monarch capable of sacking and overruling powerful domestic ministers would not for a moment have hesitated to do the same when his own views and those of his foreign minister diverged. Where the foundations of foreign policy in Europe were concerned this never happened between 1894 and 1914. As is usually the case in this very interesting and well-researched book, Roderick McLean is right to argue that while Nicholas wanted good relations with Germany and put up with the often insufferable William II in the hope of furthering this goal, his basic conception of Russian interests committed him, and therefore Russia, to the French alliance.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/194#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1189>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>