

Marina Soroka, *Britain, Russia and the Road to the First World War: The Fateful Embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff (1903–16)* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 312 pp.

Almost one hundred years have passed since the outbreak of the First World War, and there is no end in sight to the stream of analyses that has poured forth ever since the conclusion of hostilities in 1918. Not surprisingly, the particular cause of the war has received a lot of scholarly attention, from older classics like Fritz Fischer's still useful *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1967) to Neill Ferguson's more recent iconoclastic *The Pity of War* (2000). One thing at least was, and is, beyond dispute: the prewar alliance system that pitted half of the European continent against the other half was largely responsible for the ways the conflict ultimately played out. It bears remembering, however, that neither the scope nor the course of the Great War was preordained. There was indeed a time when Russia was on cordial terms with Germany. Conventional historiographical wisdom has it that the reason for the cooling of relations was Kaiser Wilhelm II's foolhardy pursuit of *Weltpolitik*. According to this version of the story, Wilhelm II ruined the balance of power Bismarck had so carefully orchestrated. This, it turns out, is only half the truth. As Marina Soroka's monograph *Britain, Russia and the Road to the First World War: The Fateful Embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff (1903–16)* demonstrates, the reason for Russia's ultimate alliance with Britain and her concomitant spurning of Germany had at least as much to do with Russian preferences as with German inflexibility and imperial megalomania. In this context the figure of Count Benckendorff, Tsar Nicholas II's ambassador to London from 1902 to 1917, is crucial. Benckendorff, a Catholic of Baltic German descent, belonged to the Westernized elite that thought of itself as politically progressive, in stark contrast to the reactionary court. A deft practitioner of what the author calls 'old diplomacy à la Russe' and a devoted husband who regularly consulted his wife on political issues, he epitomized a code of honour and loyalty that he did not abandon even in times of war. On account of his close connection with both the dowager empress Maria Feodorovna and King Edward VII, Benckendorff was perfectly placed to shuttle suitable information between the two sides. How much of this really affected Nicholas II's decision-making is debatable. The last tsar was notorious for ignoring the advice of his diplomatic corps and preferring to rely on back-door advisors in St. Petersburg. After the debacle of the

Russo-Japanese War and the revolution of 1905, however, he had no choice but to consider joining an international alliance. Benckendorff played a key role in insisting on the value of a prospective Anglo-Russian alliance. Britain, too, had much to gain from making common cause with Russia. Having concluded an Entente Cordiale with France, King Edward still faced the nightmare of an antagonistic power bloc in the East. From the perspective of empire, particularly the contested areas of Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, an agreement with Russia promised equally attractive. It was considerations such as these that led the two sides to the negotiating table and to conclude the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907. Once the Convention was in place, Benckendorff did his utmost to preserve its existence. Above all concerned with making sure that Russia did not weaken her commitment to Britain, he brushed aside the possibility of reaching a rapprochement with Germany and Austria-Hungary. The effect of his blinkered view was calamitous. Soroka puts it succinctly: 'from 1902 to 1914 Russia did not have an ambassador in Britain so much as a cultural attaché while Britain had two ambassadors to Russia, one at St. Petersburg and one in London' (286). Benckendorff's exclusive concern with maintaining the Anglo-Russian alliance set the stage for Russia's tragic involvement in the Great War.

Histories of prewar diplomacy tend to pay little attention to the role of the Russians. If the foreign ministry under Tsar Nicholas II is scrutinized at all, Soroka aptly notes, the emperor's decision-making generally receives too much credit. By the same token, the historiography so far has routinely undervalued the role and actions of the tsar's diplomats, including Benckendorff. Thanks to a comprehensive examination of the many papers he left behind, this gap in our knowledge is now being redressed. Soroka has done the scholarly community a service by rescuing the irrepressible Count from oblivion. Her study restores contingency to prewar diplomacy by offering a meticulous account of the formation of the two diplomatic blocs between the turn of the century and the outbreak of war. Among the most fascinating aspects of the sprawling analysis is the discussion of several international treaties that had the potential of constituting the germ of future alignments. The Austrian–Russian Mürzsteg Punctuation (1903), the German–Russian Björko treaty (1905) and the German–Russian Potsdam agreement (1910) testify to the tsar's continued openness to find a *modus Vivendi* with Russia's powerful Western neighbor. Soroka deserves credit for paying attention to this neglected chapter in prewar diplomatic history. Its undeniable value notwithstanding, the

work suffers from a number of flaws. One is sloppy editing. Grammatical errors that could easily have been avoided are compounded by the narrative's uneven texture. The author devotes considerable space to the lifestyle of the ambassador, which, if not directly irrelevant, at least does not augment our understanding of the key issue: Benckendorff's 'fateful embassy'. Take this brief excerpt from the second chapter. Describing the Count's social relations with illustrious British families like the Rothschilds, Soroka comments: 'He had a wonderful time as he endeavored to translate the British aristocracy's liking and interest in himself to Russia, but the ultimate political effect was minimal' (52). If the political effect was indeed minimal, as the reader has no reason to doubt, why then include a reference to these visits? While an occasionally mediocre style does not detract from the value of Soroka's research, they do diminish the book's appeal as a carefully constructed and edited analysis, not to mention its literary attractiveness. At times, the text reads like a patchwork of loosely connected episodes. Soroka never quite seems to be able to make up her mind as to what kind of history she is telling, a traditional diplomatic history or a social history of diplomats. It might of course be argued that the two overlap and that much that will eventually have an impact in great power politics has its origin in the drawing room or at a court dinner. Rumor, gossip, and speculation are after all the meat of diplomacy. Nonetheless, it surely is not necessary to follow the ping-pong of a particular rumor from beginning to end. Countless accounts of who told what to whom tend to confuse the line of argument. More seriously, they make it unlikely that the book's important insights will reach a broader readership.

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