

The affirmation of a “consular diplomacy” during the modern period

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ABSTRACT

Consulates appeared during the Middle Ages, and were institutionalized by various European states in the early modern period, primarily in the interest of commercial intermediation. From the nineteenth century onwards, the status and positioning of consulates and their officials underwent gradual but major transformations which firmly — but not completely — tied them to a European diplomatic corps. This is the essence of “consular diplomacy”.



Adolphe Billecoq, French consul in Bucharest, during the 1840s. Anonymous, Voyage illustré dans les cinq parties du monde en 1846, 1847, 1848, 1849 [Illustrated voyage in the five parts of the world in 1846, 1847, 1848, 1849], p.



Postcard depicting the consuls general and military officers of the Four Powers (France, Italy, Russia, Great Britain) during the period of Crete's independence (1897-1913). Source: E. A. Cavaliero, Canea, Crete, 1906, Wikimedia Commons. <https://goo.gl/nGmTUc>

Until the mid-twentieth century, the activity of consulates and their personnel was not considered “diplomacy,” that term being reserved for the activity of a sovereign state’s foreign affairs professionals. As attested to by bilateral treaties, decrees, consular manuals and other legal texts, the institutionalization of consulates between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries had the primary objective of making them into local administrations to serve “national” residents abroad. They were in no way expected to represent the state itself or its policy positions. Their agents were considered to be above all intermediaries and facilitators of international relations, notably commercial ones. However, in an informal and customary process which unfolded over the course of the nineteenth century, consuls were given equivalent status to diplomats, and their functions considered as genuine consular diplomacy. This evolution resulted from the fixing of practices whose initiative came from all actors in the diplomatic sphere, regardless of scale. Any analysis must nevertheless account for the variety of local situations; hence, it would be more accurate to speak of “consular diplomacies.”

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, European consular institutions, which were originally affiliated with the Secretary of State of the Navy or with trading companies, were henceforth put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: this was the case for French consulates in 1793, British consulates in 1826, Greek consulates in 1833, and Italian and German ones in 1860 and 1871 respectively, following their national unification. On the contrary, the representatives of territories whose sovereignty was contested could not claim the title of consul, but only that of commercial attaché. This was notably the case for agents appointed by Bulgaria in the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the Treaty of Berlin (1878). Aside from the semantic development, these new affiliations changed the relations between consulates and their hierarchy. The functioning of the diplomatic apparatus led to the increased bureaucratization and normalization of consular work. The general instructions given upon taking up a post thus disappeared, in favour of a succession of circulars and dispatches on top of general ordinances. This administrative build-up sought to rationalize consular production—templates to be filled out, the numbering of dispatches, a single way of handling subjects), within a dual context of the reorganization of central administrations (notably the appearance of political and commercial divisions) and the integration of consulates into diplomatic machines, facilitated by new means of (tele)communications.

For that matter, the work of consuls was deeply transformed in the late nineteenth century. For example, the political practice of agents which appeared in the wake of the Atlantic revolutions and their spread was formalized in accordance with events—national revolts, civil wars, regional and international conflicts—until it became a structural component of consular remit on the same level as commercial jurisdiction. Consuls also took full part in

the new forms of intervention of European imperialisms within their zones of influence, sometimes even anticipating them. They thus positioned themselves as precursors and spearheads of cultural diplomacy. This was the case for the support and promotion of parastatal institutions such as the Alliance française (1884), the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (Germany, 1881), or the Dante Alighieri society (Italy, 1889).

Finally, the nineteenth century was marked by the wider spread of consular productions, as demonstrated by the official publication of their dispatches, either in extenso or partially in Livres jaunes [Yellow Books] (France), Blue Books (England), Pink Books (Russia)...This media exposure changed how consulates were perceived, as well as how their officials staged themselves. As a result, the boundary between commentary—which was the expected consular posture—and decision-making—which was reserved for diplomacy—became permeable. Although it is difficult to measure its real influence on the decision-making process, the activity of consuls took full part in national diplomacy through the redundancy, abundance and intersection of information.

These transformations went beyond the area of consular duties, and involved the figure of the consul himself. Although the methods and pace of the process varied according to the state, consuls gradually became—by virtue of their training, career and social positioning—functionaries in the service of the state, moving away from the model of someone “born into the business,” which had characterized them during the early modern period. For example, whereas until the late eighteenth century agents spent their entire career beyond national borders, sometimes in charge of a single post, from the late nineteenth century, they had to change appointments every three years, could not accumulate periods spent abroad, and were obliged to occupy positions within central administrations. Consuls were actually integrated into the corps of senior civil servants of various European states, both within and beyond national borders.

However, the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by the appearance of the expert on the international scene, whose assignments entered into competition with those of consuls. Seeing as they were refused both the title of diplomat and expert, consuls subsequently had to reinvent their duties, while reaffirming their specificities. It was at the centre of the “deep territories of international relations” that consular diplomacy was genuinely inscribed and deployed. Whether it was within their consular district—a genuine diplomatic machine in miniature—or in the urban spaces in which they lived, consuls replayed on their own scale the rhythms of the international system. Although they did not take part in general political decision-making, consuls endlessly adapted, interpreted, and contradicted them, as for example with capitulations in Ottoman lands. Faced with a fait accompli, their hierarchy could only observe and officially support their approach, even if it meant reprimanding them or even transferring them in the event of serious mistakes. The positioning of the central diplomatic establishment was both ambiguous and accepted: on the one hand it refused to give consuls the status of diplomat, and on the other it gave them the keys for interpretation and representation, both with regard to apparatus—uniform, mansion, personnel—and status, for consuls enjoy de facto diplomatic immunity. As a constituted corps, these secondary international actors of European states consequently belong, both by fact and by law, to the pantheon of local figures abroad, above and beyond individual careers, whether these were more or less remarkable.

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