

Female “Diplomats” in Europe from 1815 to the Present

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Abstract

Excluded from politics, women intruded upon the secrecy of diplomacy in the fashionable gatherings of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, in intellectual salons, and from 1830 onward in embassies within the shadows of their husbands. After the Great War, the diplomatic profession gradually opened up to women, although the resistance of men, who saw diplomacy as their domain, explains the slow pace of feminization in the profession.

Article

When not the sovereign, women were excluded from the political sphere, and could not officially intervene in diplomacy, although their influence through their salons and networks of family and friends was undeniable, beginning with the Congress of Vienna (September 18, 1814 to June 9, 1815). For example, Prussian Wilhelmine de Sagan, daughter of the Duke of Courland, owed her role to the great friendship she had with Metternich. Fully aware of the prohibitions imposed on women, the Austrian representative told her: “If you were a man...you would be ambassador and I minister”. Thanks to her, he was able to more easily fulfill his political plans and to conclude an alliance against Napoleon. It is said that the French negotiator Talleyrand sought advice from Wilhelmine’s younger sister Dorothee, his nephew Edmond de Talleyrand’s spouse, who through her presence at the Congress of Vienna helped restore a positive image for France.

Alongside these women of princely birth, Fanny von Arnstein, from a Berlin family of wealthy bankers, established an intellectual salon in Vienna in the tradition of the Enlightenment, which was attended by influential men such as Wellington, Talleyrand, Hardenberg, and Varnhagen. Following the Congress of Vienna, diplomacy played a crucial role in international relations. In this context, the wives of ambassadors could be led to play a role in the shadow of their husbands. For instance, their social qualities and ease in high society were taken into consideration as part of their husband’s nomination as ambassador. Dorothea von Benckendorff, the wife of the Prince of Lieven, intervened in political deals in England during her husband’s appointment as Russian ambassador in London from 1812 to 1834. During the Second Empire, Pauline de Metternich, the wife of the Austrian ambassador in Paris, revived the policy of her grandfather Metternich, and tried to consolidate French-Austrian relations in order to maintain the peace and to strengthen Austrian power in the face of Prussia. A friend of the Empress Eugénie, she exerted her influence at receptions in the Tuileries or at outings in Compiègne, as well as in her salon in the Hôtel de Matignon, which was the site of the Austrian embassy at the time. Mélanie de Pourtalès, who was close to the Empress and to Pauline de Metternich, welcomed personalities from throughout Europe in her château in the Robertsau neighbourhood of Strasbourg, and strove after the Franco-Prussian War to reconcile France with Germany and Austria, while preserving the specificity of Alsace. It was through their pacifist and often feminist engagement that women tried to subsequently exert pressure on diplomatic positions. For instance, the Austrian radical pacifist Bertha von Suttner (1843-1914) took part in the Universal Peace Congress in Bern in 1892, where she defended the idea of a union of European states, from which Richard Nikolaus de Coudenhove-Kalergi drew inspiration a few years later. The author of *Bas les*

Armes in 1899, her commitment to peace was recognized by a Nobel Peace Prize in 1905.

After The Great War, communist regimes distinguished themselves through their promotion of women in diplomacy. In Hungary, on November 18, 1918, the President Mihály Károlyi appointed the suffragette Rózsa Bédy-Schwimmer as his “envoy extraordinary and representative minister” in Bern. However, she was recalled on January 18, 1919 under pressure from the United States, France, and former states of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Bolshevik Soviet feminist revolutionary, Alexandra Kollontaï, had professional credentials, and served as the first woman ambassador, appointed to Norway in 1924.

Following World War One, the diplomatic profession, which had until then been reserved for men, finally opened to women. In Austria they could begin taking courses at the “Konsularakademie” in 1918. In France, the Quai d’Orsay competitive exam was opened to women thanks to the initiative of Suzanne Grinberg and Luce Camuzet. On February 15, 1928, a paragraph supplemented the decree of 1828: it clearly indicates that since women do not enjoy “citizenship rights”, they cannot exercise all functions within an embassy, and “will be assigned to positions in central administration or auxiliary services”. Suzanne Borel, who passed the 1929 competitive exam, slipped “through a half-closed door”, as she later recalled in her book bearing that very title from 1972. She was the only woman admitted to the Foreign Affairs office in 1930, and served as an embassy attaché and later as second class embassy secretary in 1933. However, for lack of having full citizenship rights, she could not pursue a true consular career like her male colleagues, who moreover appealed to the Conseil d’État and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not recruit any more female diplomats until the end World War Two. When they gained the right to vote on April 21, 1944, women had access to the whole of the profession, even if a glass ceiling still prevented them from rising.

In the United Kingdom, the role played during World War Two by the orientalist Freya Stark in Iraq, or the civil servant Mary McGeachy in Washington, led to the official authorization for women to take the Foreign Office competitive exam beginning in 1946. Nevertheless, the prohibition on female diplomats from marrying was not lifted until 1972. In Ireland, where a diplomatic career was open to women only after the war, Josephine McNeill was the first Irishwoman named ambassador in 1950, taking over as head of diplomatic representation in the Netherlands. In Spain, the ban on recruiting female diplomats was lifted in 1962, although the first woman ambassador was not appointed until 1971. In Italy, the competitive exams for access to a diplomatic career were opened to women only in 1963. Marcelle Campana, who initially served as the first female consul general in Toronto in 1957, was the first French ambassador, appointed to Panama in 1972. The first Hungarian ambassador, Anna Bebrits, was appointed to the Netherlands in 1974. The European Union reserved a role for female diplomats by making gender a part of all its policies (gender mainstreaming). The appointment of the Briton Catherine Ashton in 2009 as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was a sign of this policy. She was replaced in 2014 by another woman, the Italian Federica Mogherini.

The feminization of the profession has all the same been very slow. During the 1990s, only 11% of ambassadors in the United Kingdom were women. In France, the official title of *ambassadrice* [female ambassador] has existed since 2002, and less than 14% of ambassadors are women. For all that, reconciling the career with family life is a greater obstacle for women, and diplomacy still often remains a profession of men.

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