

Diplomats and Diplomacy

Between Heritage and the Modernity of European Elites

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Abstract

Diplomats, who belonged to the same aristocratic world and were linked by transnational relations of friendship and family, also took part in debates over ideas, and symbolized in Europe the cosmopolitan ideal of the eighteenth century. Confronted since the end of nineteenth century with numerous problems, they operate within a wider and more diverse international community, with the appearance after 1945 of new non-state actors. Although diplomatic methods have undergone numerous transformations, beginning with the interwar period, they remain faithful to cultural and humanistic values, as well as to the practices inherited from their predecessors.

Article

While envoys were resorted to in Antiquity and the Middle Ages in order to settle disagreements, early modern Europe saw the implementation of a permanent diplomacy. A plurality of sovereign and often rival states, along with the religious confrontations born of the Reformation and the threat of the Ottoman Empire, gave rise to a permanent state of war, and the need for constant dialogue. The idea imposed itself that the sovereign should leave his territory as little as possible, and rely on his representatives. In France, the first permanent ambassadors were sent under Francis I, although like in the rest of Europe, their number was limited, and they were not used for all European countries.

For a long time, ambassadors came from the Church and the high nobility, especially the nobility of the sword and court, and beginning in the seventeenth century, of the robe as well. In France, of the 179 ambassadors appointed between 1715 and 1791, 67% came from a military career, 11.7% from the magistracy, 8.4% from ecclesiastical circles, and 14.4% from diplomatic services. In the eighteenth century, recruitment, which had long been open to foreigners, became nationalized, as in Spain. Further, the complexity of European affairs, the desire to settle them without conflict, and the advancement of international law spurred its professionalization. New rules for recruitment and advancement were introduced in order to promote competence, and to better organize the profession. Initially conceived for low-ranking personnel of central administrations, called on to serve as secretaries abroad, these norms were ultimately applied to the entire hierarchy. This professionalization went hand in hand with the emergence of diplomatic practices arising from the major peace congresses since Westphalia—practices that were improved by the burgeoning administrations—as well as with a new conception of the European order, around the notions of equilibrium and “balance,” which succeeded the model of the universal monarchy. During the nineteenth century, diplomats were the vigilant guardians of the balance of power in the context of the Concert of Europe, established in Vienna in 1815. After World War One, they contributed to the development of new notions, such as that of collective security.

Professionalization was imposed beginning in the nineteenth century. Diplomats henceforth served for a career, and they were admitted not only on social criteria, but also intellectual ones (degree,

competitive exams as in France from 1880, or admission to the *Auswärtige Amt* school of training for diplomats in Germany), after completion of an education predominantly in law or history, extended to include economic and financial matters. Recruitment nevertheless was slow to become more accessible. The social obligations of the profession favoured those of aristocratic birth (72% of the ambassadors from the Dual Monarchy, and 84% of those from the Second Reich before 1914). Aside from the pomp of representation, diplomats were supposed to observe rules of a specific sociability that placed great importance in ceremony and rites of protocol. Social relations, as well as belonging to transnational, familial, academic, and cultural networks, were bound to have an influence in the conducting of business, persuasion, and the circulation of information. European diplomacy therefore remained the privilege of qualified social elites who were faithful to service to the state, and were part of the national ruling class. In France, efforts were indeed made beginning in 1880 in favour of the middle bourgeoisie and new social strata, although it took until the Great War for the European diplomatic corps to open up to people from more modest social backgrounds.

Enjoying a status defined originally by customary laws and later fixed by international texts (the Vienna Conventions of 1961, 1969, and 1975)—which granted them privileges and diplomatic immunity (inviolability, jurisdictional immunity, tax exemption)—diplomats carried out functions of representation, negotiation, and information, and were tasked with defending the interests of the state and their compatriots. Although previously they could act as genuine secret agents, they now use essentially open sources of information, and are required to observe a position of neutrality with respect to the government to whom they are accredited. Alongside the classic sources of information (official circles, salons), since the second half of the nineteenth century, they have given increased importance to parliamentary debates and the press, and have broadened their circle of acquaintances to include politicians and parliamentarians as well as representatives from civil society.

Until the First World War, diplomats enjoyed great autonomy, and took active part in the conduct of external relations, although the importance of their role was later gradually called into question. The revolution of means of communication along with frequent, more or less informal meetings of heads of state and ministers, eroded their earlier autonomy. The ambassador was subject to competition from members of the government and external experts appointed by capitals, or by their own increasingly developed services (commercial, financial, military, cultural, and scientific services), sometimes acting with great independence. It was therefore necessary to reinforce the ambassador's powers, for example with the Decree of June 1, 1979. As a general rule, negotiations involve fields that are increasingly broad and technical. Due to regional integration and the globalization of the world economy, many subjects escape them, and the media tends to supplant them in their role as informer of political decision-makers.

The two world wars necessitated the institution of a system of collective security and more effective cooperation, in the form of international organizations—the League of Nations and later the United Nations organization and its specialized institutions—which were regional, subject to international law, and gave rise to a specific kind of diplomacy. The representative to an international institution has a very particular role, that of first and foremost negotiating texts, multilateral conventions, or simple resolutions. His assignment sometimes amounts to parliamentary work: participating in consultations, attending caucuses, trying to gather votes, and obtain the support of the largest number of delegations. He also plays a role in the administrative and financial control of the organizations—or organization—to which he is accredited, and participates in the designation of its directors and secretaries, as well as in the election of members of its governing bodies.

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