

# The Decline of Bismarcks European order

*Franco-Russian Relations 1875-1890*

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On the 7th of February 1887 a certain Russian by name of Ilya Fadeyevich Tsion, alias Élie de Cyon as he was known in his incarnation as a Frenchman, boarded at Gare du Nord the train with destination Berlin and Petersburg. Cyon was greatly excited as he had been entrusted with a confidential letter from the French President to the Russian Tsar, as well as being charged with orally relaying a secret message from the high French command to its Russian counterpart. Posterity, however, is less excited by what Cyon himself no doubt considered very important, but what charms it, or at least charms the author (and the present reviewer) is what would have been considered trivial by the secret messenger, namely the train ride itself, whose evocation allows the reader to feel the rhythm of life as reflected in the mundane details of life of the late 19th century without the knowledge of which one may never properly understand historical events, a knowledge which is becoming progressively harder and harder not to say impossible for future generations to acquire and properly appreciate.

As Cyon had installed himself in his sleeper and the train pulled out of Paris the early darkness of a North European winter afternoon had already begun to settle. The following afternoon would find him in Berlin, where the make-up of the train was rearranged. During the next night the train passed droning through the flat frozen fields of West and East Prussia and in the morning making a prolonged halt in Königsberg. It would be early afternoon before it reached the German-Russian border at Eidkuhnen-Virballen, where a long delay would be caused not only by the passport and customs ceremonies executed by Russian officials looking quite impressive in their greatcoats but also by the necessity to change the Western *wagon-lits* for the commodious Russian counterparts fitted to the indigenous broad-gauge<sup>1</sup> and with icicles hanging from their roofs and the charcoal smoke floating up from the samovar chimneys into the still frosty air. In Petersburg one would reach the following morning. This meant that if one like Cyon had business in Moscow (he was to meet the influential Russian editor and panslavist Katkov) one had the whole day to negotiate on sleighs the snow-muffled Russian capital where all sounds were muted, before entering the over-night train to Moscow in the evening.

The book under review constitutes the first of a study whose the second and concluding - 'The Fateful Alliance', I already read a few years ago at our northern retreat, the late summer-nights providing such a fitting background to the reading with its occasional references to Dachas in the Finnish woods. The title of the first then became known to me and for many years I tried to locate it in bookstores but in vain, and only by availing myself

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<sup>1</sup> In later years the change of cars would be unnecessary, as the wheel axles were changed, as I experienced on my train-crossing at the Finnish-Soviet border in the summer of 1968

of the services of amazon was I able to locate a used copy just prior to my most recent departure for the north<sup>2</sup> It can be argued that the alliance between France and Russia constituted one of those crucial necessary conditions for the out-break of the First World War whose catastrophic ramifications would not only mar the 20th century but actually pervert it. An alliance between States is an abstraction born out of the thin veneer of diplomacy, but nevertheless having the potential for momentous consequences far beyond those in which it was initially conceived. It thus provides a very congenial subject for the author whose professional life was devoted to diplomatic service<sup>3</sup>. The empirical sources of the subject matter are easily identifiable in the form of diplomatic records and personal memoirs and whose interpretation he is exceptionally well qualified to make. The narrow groove of diplomatic activity is eminently amendable to a detailed micro-history, yet with as noted significant macro-historical applications, so the study does not ultimately degenerate into an exercise in futility. As everything significant happens diplomatically one is able to structure the material with the linear coherence of a novel, and although Kennan sticks to the factual the study does indeed read like a novel with its various subsidiary plots and gallery of colorful personalities. In fact the material would be ideal for a fictional embellishment, but although the writer eschews such, he nevertheless escapes the pitfalls of standard factual historical presentations, in which events are too often drily recalled one after the other, hitting the hapless reader as so many bumping-intos of a Brownian motion. This is achieved by a motivational approach coupled with vivid personality portraits causing the players to stand out instead of remaining mere names, all of it building up to suspense that slowly unfolds. Such a feat is made possible with the authors strong personal identification of the material coupled with a irresistible delight in writing, a writing that however is not allowed to be done for its own sake but is held in careful check, and when its shackles occasionally are relaxed, as in the vignettes exemplified in the introductory paraphrase above, the temporary relief of the author at being allowed to indulge in poetic digression is palpable.

The Franco-Russian approach was not the impulsive whim of the moment but a long process with many setbacks that matured over decades bringing about a major rethinking of both contrahents. It played out against the background of the dominant diplomatic presence of Bismarck and the German Reich during the second half of the 19th century, and can profitably be seen as a reaction to the European Order that Bismarck tried with such initial success to create and maintain. France having resisted German unification found itself embroiled in a war with Bismarck. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 turned out to be a deeply humiliating catastrophe for the French, proud as it was of its tradition of military glory. While the Prussian triumph against the Austrian empire a few years earlier had wisely been tempered by mild conditions, Bismarck may not have been able to

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<sup>2</sup> When I started reading it I was seized with a mild panic, as the subject matter appeared identical with that of the previous book, and I feared that it might have been the same book but under a different title for to me unknown technical reasons, but further reading reassured me that this could not have been the case, and I realized that the two books were indeed linked and that I had unfortunately been introduced to them in reverse order, having encountered the second volume fortuitously.

<sup>3</sup> Kennans remarkably long life (1904-2005) was more or less split in the middle by his retirement from official life to that of a historian at the Institute of Advanced Study

fully resist the demands of the excited Prussian military in its subsequent triumph, and the French were saddled with indemnities to be paid and territorial losses of which the latter smarted the most<sup>4</sup>. Although the indemnities imposed no hardship but paradoxically may have stimulated the economic recovery, allowing the French to very quickly reconstitute their armed forces to become on par with the Germans, their self-confidence was not as easily reconstructed. Lack of self-confidence bred a mood of 'revanchism' which in its turn repeatedly caused exaggerated fears of a German preventive war, fears that Kennans stresses again and again were totally unfounded. France having been isolated at the war, something that Bismarck had made sure was the case, was naturally fishing for an ally against its powerful neighbour, and of the candidates available Russia was actually at the onset the least natural. Russian foreign politics was ambitious, throughout its recent history it had sustained a steady territorial growth, initially in the east far away from the European theatre, but later letting its weight also be known in the west. The decline of the Ottoman empire was becoming manifest during the 18th century, having been a constant threat to Christian Europe until the 17th, and accelerated during the early 19th giving the Russians both an excuse as well as an opportunity to concentrate its interest on the Balkans. An excuse, as a large Slavic population was under Turkish suzerainty, and an opportunity to the landlocked empire to control the straits by seizing Constantinople and thus achieve free passage to the Mediterranean, which had become something of a fixed idea of Russian foreign policy. That Russian interest in the Balkans was not uncontested was testified by the recent Crimean war, and the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 to liberate the Bulgarians revealed serious defects of the Russian army and its logistics. The result was somewhat humiliating, and the humiliation was furthermore rubbed in during the convened Berlin Congress, by Bismarck's sincere attempts to save the face of the Russians and accord it concessions it would not have been able to extract on its own. The outcome was that the Russians felt condescended to and their freedom of action curtailed nourishing a resentment, although not as sharp and acute as that suffered by the French, still pervasive. To add insult to injury, the newly emerged Bulgarian state did not prove to be as compliant a Russian client as had been envisioned and expected, providing a colorful subplot of the story Kennan sets out to delineate<sup>5</sup>. Bismarck took great pains to avoid any Balkan

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<sup>4</sup> The grief for the lost parts took almost hysterical proportions, while more level-headed observers noted that in practice it mattered little, were not the populations of Alsace and Lorraine able to carry on their lives as if nothing momentous had happened? However the handling of the German authorities of the acquisition was not the most fortunate, leaving the inhabitants less happy with German rule at the end than they had been at the beginning.

<sup>5</sup> Admittedly only a footnote in world history, but like many footnotes of history very colorful. In this case the German prince, under strong measures to abdicate emanating from the Russians whose emperor had taken a very strong personal dislike to him, actually was forcefully removed, only to be reinstated by forces loyal to him. To the comical picture belongs also a conspiracy, of which the Prince was innocent, during the diplomatic lull of the summer to, against the terms of the Berlin agreement, unite with Bulgaria a province under the suzerainty of the Sultan. The conspiracy was successful, and the Prince was given credit for the very popular unification, much to the embarrassment of the Russians, who, not surprisingly, suspected the invisible hand of Bismarck. Furthermore Serbia, in spite of the friendly attitude of its head,

entanglements<sup>6</sup> but could not of course prevent the Austrian involvement in the region. Thus in 1881 a secret tripartite treaty between the heads of the German, Austrian and Russian empires was signed for three years, renewed in 1884 but failed to be so in 1887. The object of this treaty was to prevent any Austro-Russian war to ensue.

One speaks easily about France, Germany, Russia as if they were actual individuals with the sympathies, fears and ambitions such invariably exhibit. This is of course metaphorical, yet not fully without a literal interpretation. What we are talking about is of course diplomacy, and diplomacy is based on a thin veneer of the population. The outmost crust of this veneer was of course the complicated network of European dynasties and their convoluted intermarriages, reminiscent of the mutual-ownerships that characterize modern international companies. The existence of this royalty, which would be completely swept away by the First World War, allowed a literal identification of a country with a person, an identification that was taken quite seriously, not the least by those directly concerned. But if royalty provided ultimate power, not only symbolical; real executive power needed to be exercised by real competence provided by an elite of politicians, military heads, diplomats, co-existing with a larger and less politically focused elite of land-owners, businessmen, lawyers, scientists, journalists and teachers. It was this extended elite that constituted the vague notion of public opinion whose influence those in power may resent but never consistently neglect. In the case of Russia this elite was thin indeed, maybe including only a few thousand people, the large mass of the newly liberated serf providing a mute entity good only as cannon-fodder to be squandered. Thus particularly articulate individuals, as the above mentioned editor Katkov, could exercise a disproportionate informal influence. Russian political and intellectual life during the 19th century was split between liberal Westerners who wanted Russia to join the rest of the world and those who felt that Russia had a special mission, a mission that either took the form of a panslavic ambition or a special commitment to the Orthodox Church<sup>7</sup>. The latter were in ascendancy, and have in fact in various disguises, Communism being one of its more unlikely ones, been dominant in Russia also throughout the 20th century and promises to be so also in the 21st. It was this patriotic Russian movement that were calling for a free hand and a liberation from the connection to the two other Eastern and Central European imperiums, without fully being aware of the formal ties that connected them (although those were slowly being leaked). In this royal context of most of Europe, France stood out, with the fall of the farcical version of Napoleon, it was once again a Republic, with the fickleness of individual power such an arrangement with an extended public opinion necessitates. As a Republic France was viewed suspiciously by the Russian Tsar Alexander III, who was known for his lethargic temperament and aversion to change. On the other hand collaboration on the military level was far more natural, military hierarchies being universally similar conducive

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attacked Bulgaria, giving the Prince the opportunity to excel in what he was best at, namely military organization. The Bulgarians won the war, giving the Prince even more prestige, as well as rattling the Russians. Eventually they managed to get rid of him, only to find that he had been able to set up Regents, with a fiercely independent attitude towards the Russians

<sup>6</sup> To the extent of forcibly preventing the German prince called to king the new state to marry a certain German princess for fear of even peripheral German entanglements potentially to provoke the Russians.

<sup>7</sup> which would exclude Polish Slavs but include Rumanian and Greek

to mutual sympathy and trust, when actually not accidentally being pitted against each other. On the contrary ultimate ties with Germany would rest on the respect and affection of kinship between the successive Tsars Alexander II and III to their uncle and great-uncle respectively - the German Kaiser Wilhelm I. This dynastical tie, based on nothing but personal sentiment, would be broken by the ascent of the latter's (and incidentally Queen Victoria's as well) grandson Wilhelm II, a coming into power and responsibility which also rather soon saw the dismissal of Bismarck. It is very tempting to see this event as a crucial turning point in European history (with as noted catastrophic implications) when the cautious and well-thought out policies of a Bismarck were replaced by the impetuous and romantically patriotic one (more along French and Russian lines) perpetrated by the young and enthusiastic Kaiser. But history is not at the mercy of personal whims tossing it hither and thither, but floats along currents it is the business of the historian to find and identify. Kennan argues that the decline and ultimate dissolution of the Bismarckian Order was inevitable. Bismarck, like his King and later Kaiser, were essentially men of the 18th century<sup>8</sup> to whom war was indeed in the sense Clausewitz really meant it continuation of diplomacy but with other means. Thus limited affairs with well-defined objectives. Bismarck had little truck with war for its own sake as a manifestation of glory and national expression. Furthermore Bismarck had very little sense and interest in economics, politics was for him diplomatic politics, a subtle game of chess and personal ruse at which he excelled, not economic politics. Yet economics had its own internal dynamics oblivious to Bismarck indifference, and its spectacular growth during his period had ramifications beyond his measure and radically shifted the political landscape, making him and his world obsolete<sup>9</sup>. Industrial revolution and scale of production had profound and catastrophic effects when combined with the ancient virtues of war as manifestation of personal and national worth making war itself a horrible enterprise, as its unleashing in the 20th century would prove over and over again. Kennan makes this point over and over again, a point which at his time of writing the study during the Cold War had particular poignancy when Nuclear armament was going out of control.

A history of diplomacy is very much a history of personalities, and a unprepossessing hero of Kennan is the Russian Foreign minister Giers. This uncharismatic professional diplomat had none of the flamboyance and genius of a Bismarck, yet his integrity and thorough professionalism earn the admiration and personal sympathy of the author. Consistently underestimated, he nevertheless managed, if constantly threatened, to provide a bulwark against the adventurism of the pan-Slavic forces, advocating to the Tsar not so much an overtly pro-German policy as a cautious approach and a sound appreciation of Russian interests and actual strengths. One may argue that the progeny of Giers not being Slavic<sup>10</sup> made him less prone to be swayed by sentimental pan-slavic visions. In discussing

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<sup>8</sup> Bismarck was admittedly born in the 19th (1815), but Wilhelm I was born (179\*)

<sup>9</sup> One may well argue that the world of Bismarck was obsolete from the very start, taking into account his arch-conservative stand that catapulted his political career and his deep sentimental attachment to the notion of Junkerdom. Still that did not prevent him from playing the diplomatic game with such success, one of the foundations of its success being his very conservatism, resulting in a sense of measure, knowing when enough is enough

<sup>10</sup> According to Kennan he had Swedish roots

the delicate relations between Giers and the Tsar, Kennan touches upon the fundamental questions of divisions of power, each age providing its particular manifestations. In the 19th century ultimate power lay by the crowned head. Those crowned heads seldom had the actual head for effective government, especially not in the setting of a complicated modern society<sup>11</sup>. It is not that they were not devoted (most naturally had an elevated sense of their importance) or occasionally quite knowledgeable and intelligent, but with few exceptions all were limited as ordinary people inevitably are, a limitation of character and intelligence further stunted by a pampered upbringing, as exemplified in their insipidity of interests and the banality of the ways they chose to spend their time. Thus day-to-day power was assumed by those knowledgeable enough to conceive and direct policies, their power on one hand being endowed by the ruler, on the other hand manifesting itself by educating and persuading the will of the very ruler, whose servants they were. On the other hand Bismarck likened the process by that of rider and horse, the monarch being the horse possessing the ultimate physical power, while the object of the rider was to harness that physical power, by attuning the impulses of the beast pandering to its tastes and assuaging its fears. Bismarck obviously managed the King and later Kaiser with a far tighter reign than Giers was able to control the far more cantankerous Alexander III, establishing a relation of mutual trust which however significantly depended on their respective personalities and was thus not to be continued with the grandson.

The end of the tripartite alliance in 1887 did not spell the ruin of the special German Russian understanding, but the more restricted bipartite alliance took some time in being formed, the Russians holding themselves aloof and the Germans lying low lest it would appear that their interest in such an understanding would be greater than the Russians. Such are the subtleties of the diplomatic game, in fact being codifications of similar subtleties in social interaction, only with, as noted, far more momentous consequences. The story told by Kennan is hence a more or less chronologically straightforward (the linear coherence of a novel mentioned above) presentation of the waxing and waning of international understanding, or perhaps more to the point, misunderstandings, in which not only first order interchanges of information is important, but maybe even more so second order in which the forms and timings of communications play an even more crucial role, providing much source of delight for the reader temperamentally attuned. The story is however not concluded in this volume, the signing of the actual Franco-Russian alliance left for the sequel, by which time Bismarck is out of the picture, but not the unassuming Giers, as I recall.

What is the point of it all? A basic feature of all historical writing is to tell things as they really were, never mind the tricky philosophical question of what that really means, to in order to preserve for posterity a documentation of events. This by itself has an intrinsic value as a story relating to reality regardless of possible applications. A fictional account, also has intrinsic value just as a story, but then it needs to maintain a certain pleasing coherency and artistic merit (whatever is meant by that), the point of history is that it does not need that additional structure, in principle its factual reality is suffi-

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<sup>11</sup> Those heads were by then inherited, but one should not give undue importance to the actual process of succession, the situation is not significantly changed for those elevated by election.

cient to warrant its worth<sup>12</sup>. But good history obviously needs to be more than the mere presentation of historical facts, like a successful work of fiction, it needs to display an inner coherency, in which facts are not just facts but linked to each other as to stimulate the imagination of the reader and produce in him an understanding. But this process is almost indistinguishable from the moral question of what history can teach us, because any understanding involves insights with applications not limited to their source. History concerns events in a particular time and those events will have no relevance in different times, as far as they are interpreted literally. Thus the teaching of history is not a matter of straightforward reproducibility but the identification of more general principles which may be articulated as *bon mots* but whose real impact tends to be implicitly evoked rather than explicitly expressed. As noted above diplomatic history allows a well-defined presentation with little speculation needed beyond the extant documentation. Furthermore diplomacy is a refined and stylized social intercourse in which the subtleties of inter-human intercourse are exploited in a context in which individual interest and concomitant ambition normally driving such intercourse is forced to be subservient to abstract collective ones. (In particular rage that can be effective individual to individual, tends to have disastrous self-defeating consequences in diplomatic contexts.) Human nature supposedly being the same (and once again begging the question of what is mean by human nature and its supposed invariance) thus a reader of history based on its manifestations will be assured of a familiar territory, albeit under different seasonal conditions, and as William James notes, curiosity is based on seeing the familiar in unfamiliar contexts. Curiosity being the driving force behind learning, a historical work that arouses curiosity is indeed bound to induce learning, although, as noted above, it is not always easy to identify what is actually being learned. New tricks of the trade? Maybe future diplomats may find tangible advice in the reading of Kennans story, but the eventual benefits of any historical study are not practical but inspirational, fleshing out the elements of the grand story and making us curious to ask questions and explore related matters, not unlike what ultimately drives the scientist.

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<sup>12</sup> Naive is the reader who takes a novel on face value; yet this does not relieve the author who abuses the trust of a potential reader by giving the impression that the yarns he is about to tell is about reality, such a reader will inevitably feel cheated when that contract between reader and writer turns out never to have been sincerely entered. But of course if the reader is sufficiently taken by the story in its intrinsic form, he will tend to forgive the author, and will be liable in retrospect to discover subtle hints of ruse in the text, the discovery of which will only enhance the pleasure. My point is that claiming that something is true is to give it a substantial *a priori* interest, and if this initial interest will not expand in the process, it will obviously collapse to nothing once the true state of affairs is disclosed.