

Irmin Schneider. *Die deutsche Rußlandpolitik 1890-1900*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2003. 344 S. (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-506-78073-7.

Reviewed by Niall Williams (National University of Ireland, Galway)
Published on H-German (November, 2006)



The Failure of German Diplomacy after Bismarck

Irmin Schneider's work, submitted as a doctoral thesis in 2002, is a detailed study of Russo-German relations in the period 1890-1900 based on memoirs and an impressive range of contemporary state documents from Germany, France and Russia.[1] Schneider chose this narrow time span because it marked a radical transformation of relations between the European powers. Otto von Bismarck strove to maintain the European "concert of nations" up to his resignation in 1890, but by 1900 Europe was well on its way to a system of alliances that would divide the powers into two defensive military blocs and endure until the First World War. The course of Russo-German relations is understood as central to this transition. According to historians, Count Leo von Caprivi, Bismarck's successor, greatly weakened Germany's position by deciding in 1890 not to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, which had guaranteed the neutrality of each party in the event of the other being attacked by a third.[2] By allowing the Russo-German agreement to lapse, he removed an important obstacle to closer cooperation between Russia and France. The subsequent chaotic and impetuous nature of German diplomacy, which was born out of a desire to compensate for this loss of security, was central to the polarization of European relations.

Schneider's work is not, however, restricted to diplomacy. It also takes account of the role played by cultural, political, trade, economic and military issues in Russo-German relations. The body of the work is divided into four sections with a short final section presenting Schneider's conclusions. The sections deal in turn with

the legacy of the Bismarck era; macro-demographic, social and political developments affecting the diplomatic climate in Europe in the late nineteenth century; Russo-German bilateral relations and Russo-German relations in the context of relations between the Great Powers generally. Schneider traces the decreasing importance of ties between the ruling houses and the increasing significance of trade disputes, conflicting economic interests, military planning and nationalist antagonism stirred up by the respective presses, all of which strained relations between Russia and Germany. Schneider also includes a detailed discussion of the issues of Poland and the ethnic German minority in Russia, though these issues were of minor importance. The discussion of competition and cooperation in the Far East is not well integrated into the author's argument. This problem is doubtless a result of the obvious difficulty experienced by Schneider in accounting for the influence of Germany's so-called *Weltpolitik* in the latter half of the decade. Whereas in the past Germany had largely accepted its status as a purely European power, *Weltpolitik* was a deliberate attempt to transform Germany's international relations by greatly increasing its influence in all parts of the world.

The author argues that the importance of the lapse of the Reinsurance Treaty has been overstated. In this he agrees with Stefan Kestler, who recently produced another important work on the topic.[3] Relations between Russia and Germany had been under increasing strain from the late 1870s due to the spread of anti-German sentiment in Russia and the agitation of Russian nationalist newspapers. This tension caused many in Germany

to call into question the usefulness of the Reinsurance Treaty, which many felt Russia would renege on in the event of armed conflict between France and Germany. In the latter years of his tenure, Bismarck appeared to cultivate a closer relationship with Britain just in case relations with Russia deteriorated further. That being said, Schneider concurs with the prevailing view that German diplomacy after Bismarck was characterized by incompetence and contributed handsomely to the steady weakening of Germany's position.

Schneider also confirms the view that the incompetence of German diplomacy after Bismarck was due not only to the quality of his successors as chancellor, but to the way in which the government functioned after Bismarck's departure. Whereas Bismarck personally decided on central foreign policy objectives and coordinated Germany's diplomatic efforts, after his resignation no one person, neither the chancellor nor the kaiser, was in a position to perform this coordinating role. While discussing the attitudes and motivations of the chancellors, ministers, foreign policy experts, military planners and ambassadors who played an important role in German foreign policy, Schneider shows how the initiative shifted from one to another, often as a result of their gaining or losing influence with the kaiser, and how these officeholders often worked at cross purposes to each other in the absence of a coordinating authority. This state of affairs he describes as "polycratic chaos" (pp. 84-85).

The central aim of Bismarck's foreign policy from 1871 was to prevent war, or at least to put it off for as long as possible, while simultaneously working to reconcile the other European powers with German unification. The "New Course," as the changed foreign policy from 1890 came to be known, consistently overstated the strength of Germany's position while underestimating the dangers it faced (pp. 32-33). It continued to be guided by tenets that had lost their validity: the belief that cordial relations between autocratic Russia and the French republic could not last for very long, and that the

conflict between Russian and British interests would not be resolved, which precluded the possibility of an alliance between the two powers. The author avoids the trap of seeing the other powers as only reacting to German foreign policy. According to Schneider, Germany played a vital role in the process by which it became increasingly isolated and Europe became polarized into two mutually suspicious military blocs. Germany spurned a number of opportunities for cooperation with Britain and Russia that might have counteracted this process. In each case, though these stances contradicted its need for greater security, suspicion of the motivations of the other party and a propensity to guard its own independence jealously prevented Germany from acting. At the same time, Germany's own initiatives were so erratic as to make it appear undependable. The implication of Schneider's work is that the failure to develop and pursue consistently a coherent foreign policy that took account of changes in Europe proved disastrous for German foreign relations and contributed appreciably to the shifting climate in Europe.

Notes

[1]. The reviewer wishes to acknowledge the generous funding of his research by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

[2]. See Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler 1871-1945* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1995), pp. 158-159; and Gordon Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 230-233.

[3]. Stefan Kestler, *Betrachtungen zur kaiserlich deutschen Rußlandpolitik. Ihre Bedeutung für die Herausbildung des deutsch-russischen Antagonismus zwischen Reichsgründung und Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges (1871-1914)* (Hamburg: Kovac, 2002). This work was submitted as a *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Bamberg in 1999. Schneider appears not to have been aware of its existence prior to publishing his own work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Niall Williams. Review of Schneider, Irmin, *Die deutsche Rußlandpolitik 1890-1900*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12483>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.