



Stefan Siennell. *Die Geheime Konferenz unter Kaiser Leopold I: Personelle Strukturen und Methoden zur politischen Entscheidungsfindung am Wiener Hof*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001. 507 pp. EUR 70,60 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-631-37597-6.

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Published on HABSBURO (January, 2002)



## Reconstructing an Experiment in Political Decision-Making in Baroque Austria

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This book is an extended data base which will be useful to future researchers on the politics and political culture of the reign of Leopold I, but it makes only tentative conclusions about the effectiveness of the Privy Conference, a small committee of high ranking officials personally chosen by Leopold to meet in his presence and offer their advice, as a means for speeding up the decision-making process. The book opens with a discussion of recent scholarly debates about “absolutism,” but does not seem to offer much new insight about the reality of the phenomenon or the quality of royal government in Austria. In theory Leopold had all the necessary powers to rule independent of any superior power but the divine, but he did not possess the will to challenge providence. Nevertheless his actions with respect to the advice he sought and the use he made of it had the effect of reinforcing the absolute necessity of his personal decisions. As in most monarchies, so in Austria the power of the crown depended not on its ability to command anything it wanted, but the improbability of anything important getting done unless the crown commanded that something definite be done.

By the reign of Ferdinand II (1618-1637) there emerged a cotery (Siennell uses the word *Gremium* or “guild”) of advisers who, by virtue of some court office or designation, sat collectively as the Privy Council, *Geheimer Rat*, a body which the monarch consulted

regularly on matters of public policy and particularly on foreign affairs and defense. Like all such institutions in every European state, this body had the tendency to grow when the crown used the distinction of membership to reward some court favorite. The expansion of state business, alongside the growing number of voices to be heard discussing it, led to delays, confusion, and inevitable blunders. Already in the 1630s Ferdinand had resorted to sending matters to special small groups of advisers, the *Deputierte Raete* to examine documents and send a recommendation to the larger council.

When Leopold I came to the throne at age 18, he inherited this system along with Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, his father’s brother, who brought with him a rich experience of international politics as *Statthalter* in the Spanish Netherlands. When Leopold Wilhelm died in 1662, Leopold turned to his tutor Prince Portia to take on the role of first minister. Portia died in 1665 and Leopold determined to be henceforth his own first minister (with encouragement from Philip IV of Spain and the example of Louis XIV of France). To achieve this he gathered a group of four seasoned courtiers (Gonzaga, Auersperg, Lobkowitz, Schwarzenberg), plus a fifth, Lamberg, to replace Portia, to meet regularly in his own presence as a “Narrow Privy Council”, to offer advice. This they would do in descending order of rank, with Leopold speaking last, indicating his own intent on the matter. Leopold himself ordered the documents to be the subject for comment sent to the members of the conference in advance of the meeting.

This group of advisers, which Leopold maintained with greater or less enthusiasm throughout the reign, came to be known by most as the Privy Conference, *Die Geheime Konferenz*, though the term was not always used, and there were never specific instructions which gave it a regular status among various governing bodies in the monarchy. Its historic position as the central decision making institution in Austria comes largely from Esaias Pufendorf, Swedish envoy to Vienna in 1673, whose report on his mission was published in the 19th century.

It is no easy task to reconstruct the Conference, for the documents describing its meetings are scattered and often illegible. The secretaries who attended the meetings, usually two or three, had no consistent pattern of recording who was present or where the meeting was held, and often kept scratch notes on the votes in graphite pencil which have all but faded over the years. Stefan Siennell has gathered a staggering number of surviving documents from a number of archives. Over twelve hundred footnotes with multiple references to documents relating to a particular meeting or topic provide the framework upon which a preliminary sketch of the Conference can be built.

This account follows two basic lines: personnel and themes. In the first instance Siennell discusses all forty of the individuals who participated in the meetings of the conference between 1660 and 1705, giving brief biographies of them all and adding to that important data about the secretaries as well. As for the members of the conference, the summary finds that virtually all were, unsurprisingly, members of the higher court nobility who had held various court offices and had traveled extensively to other courts. Both administrative and diplomatic experience was common to most. Only two, Chancellor Hoher and Bishop Sinelli, were of non-noble families, and the latter the only cleric to serve that function. Consistently at least one and usually two of the members had experience representing the emperor at the imperial diet now permanently in session at Regensburg.

The secretaries who served the conference making records of the positions taken and then preparing clear copies to serve the scribes writing instructions to representatives abroad were largely drawn from the chancelleries: mainly the Austrian court chancellery (*Hofkanzlei*), the imperial chancellery (*Reichskanzlei*), with a very few coming from the Treasury (*Hofkammer*) or from the War Council (*Hofkriegsrat*). All were university graduates with degrees in law, some had diplomatic experi-

ence, particularly at the imperial diet. In the case of the secretaries as well as the deputies the choice of personnel was entirely at the Emperor's discretion. There were no court offices that guaranteed membership in the conference, nor did membership confer any clearly recognized legal status beyond the obvious reputation of being a part of the innermost circle of advisers to the crown.

Siennell has drawn a graph (pp. 412-413) showing on a time line the distribution of known meetings of the conference and the number of documents surviving. The first period of great activity ran from 1665-1669, peaking in 1667; a second ran from 1671-1673; a third from 1681-1683. Subsequently the number of meetings and the paperwork generated declined to virtual insignificance until the conference itself was disbanded by Joseph I shortly after Leopold's death in 1705.

Designed in part to keep the most sensitive discussions secret, the conference had trouble with security from the beginning, no surprise in a world where copyists and protocollists were paid piteances, and those often in arrears. The French envoy Gremonville reported in 1668 to be able to get a copy of the secret treaty with Spain for only 500 ducats, or 350 pistoles (p. 299). The source was in this case a brother of a *registrateur* at the Chancellery.

Even more problematic for smooth functioning were the frictions among the personalities involved. This area Siennell does not touch upon except to reckon it important. Still it is obvious that the first two peaks in the conference activity coincide with Lobkowitz's dominant position at court, and the decline with his dismissal in 1674. That period was one when Austrian policy was largely concerned with France, a hiatus in relations with Turkey, which in any case were the exclusive province of the War Council.

More difficult to explain is the evidence that there were relatively few meetings of the conference after 1683. Siennell suggests that this period saw a transition to a new system of governing from the *Kabinett* in which Leopold I no longer attended conference meetings regularly, and began to send requests for consultation on specific matters to small committees of officials with special expertise in those areas. Often one or more of these ad hoc groups would be a member of the conference, but the crown's decisions and instructions would go directly from Leopold's private office to the chancelleries. There are muted suggestions in some of the correspondence among conference members that Leopold's hearing was weakening, and that he could not follow verbal discussions, particularly when heated, with any reliability.

Whether or not a detailed, analytical history of the *Geheime Konferenz* can or needs to be done, this assembly of computerized references to the archival sources will be the place where such a study will have to begin. It would then have to add more detail about the political agendas of conference members and the forces leading to shifting alignments among them. Sienell gives us a picture of a regime experimenting with various methods for finding its way through a maze of power relationships in central Europe in a manner that would make the sovereign's policies consistent and effective. What role this experiment played in Austria's rise to the ranks of the great powers will be clearer when the conference is examined in relation to the other independent consultive bodies at the imperial court.

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**Citation:** John Spielman. Review of Sienell, Stefan, *Die Geheime Konferenz unter Kaiser Leopold I: Personelle Strukturen und Methoden zur politischen Entscheidungsfindung am Wiener Hof*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

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