



Bringing Personality Back in: Leadership and War – A British-German Comparison 1740-1945. 28th Prinz-Albert-Gesellschaft Conference. Coburg: Prinz-Albert-Gesellschaft e.V., Coburg, 11.09.2009-12.09.2009.

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The goal of this conference, as outlined in the useful introductory comments by Dr KARINA UR-BACH (London) and Professor BRENDAN SIMMS (Cambridge), was to open to scrutiny a topic of considerable current interest and relevance, namely leadership in war. As was well understood by all the participants present at Coburg, we live in an era when all issues relating to war are much under scrutiny. In part, this reflects the existing prevalence, even ubiquity, of conflict. Not only have extensive campaigns been waged recently in such theatres as Iraq, Georgia and Gaza and continue to be undertaken in Afghanistan and its environs, but, in addition, with the battle against terrorism being designated (albeit many would argue inappropriately) as a ‘war’ its own right, the spread of military activity is truly global, with outrages in America, Spain, Britain and Indonesia all being linked together as moments in this broader conflict. An additional source of contemporary interest in war leadership lies in the fact that there is currently considerable discussion – much of it critical – about the performance of those currently in charge of directing these wars. Views abound on the abilities or otherwise of, inter alia, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown at directing conflict. As a result, an examination of past precedent, as intended in this conference, is not only topical, it is also pertinent to current concerns.

In accordance with the specific goals of the Prinz-Albert-Gesellschaft, a society with a specific Anglo-German focus, the scrutiny undertaken at this conference was directed exclusively at war leaders from Britain and Germany, the latter defined broadly to include the Habsburg monarchy. Largely owing to the availability of particular speakers and the non-availability of others, this produced a notable analytical quirk, namely an interesting juxtaposition in the specific figures selected for each session. While all of the British ‘statesmen’ were civilian politicians and, ultimately, heads of government, four of the five German war leaders under discussion were heads of state, in three cases as monarchs. Although unintentional, one might suggest that this contrast actually reflects the historically different traditions of the two nations, with the wartime role of royalty in German lands being greater than that of their counterparts in the more parliamentary state of Great Britain. By accident rather than design, the conference organizers have, therefore, demonstrated one fundamental difference in British and German war leadership. And this was not the only interesting lesson: the five sessions of this conference proved to be both extremely diverse and also highly productive.

The conference began with a consideration of the period of the Seven Years War. Frederick the Great was the subject of the first paper, in which

Professor TIM BLANNING (Cambridge) argued with considerable vigour and emphasis (and with the only musically illustrative interlude to the conference) that the Prussian King's particular contribution to war leadership was the aggregation of all power and responsibility for directing a state at war in his own person. Acting simultaneously as head of state, prime minister and commander in chief, Frederick, in effect, brought absolute unity of command to the Prussian war effort in a manner not seen since Suleiman the Magnificent and not duplicated by any of the other belligerents in this conflict. This brought 'extremism' to the conduct of the war in the sense that Frederick could take risks, spontaneously and at the spur of the moment, that no subordinate or collection of subordinates would ever have contemplated undertaking on their own authority. This, in itself, was risky, as, while it made victory more likely, it also enhanced the possibilities of defeat. Such was the danger, as well as the advantage, of absolute unity of command.

Pitt the Elder, as BRENDAN SIMMS demonstrated ably in the succeeding paper, did not enjoy the same degree of control as Frederick. Indeed, part of his genius as a war leader was his ability to forge and hold together a domestic parliamentary coalition in support of the war effort. Yet, in one sense he was similar to Frederick in that he, too, was also a risk taker. This was manifested in a remarkable willingness to rethink his strategic assumptions and change the direction of the war effort as seemed appropriate. Thus, while once opposed to the granting of money to Hannover, he later made a German-centred policy the heart of his plan for defeating France. Such strategic nimbleness proved highly successful and had the advantage of not only bringing Britain closer to victory, but also of enhancing Pitt's popularity and thereby his ability to maintain and control his parliamentary coalition.

The second session also began with consideration of a Pitt, this time Pitt the Younger. As

FRANK LOTHAR KROLL (Chemnitz) successfully explained, for this scion of the Pitt family, war leadership involved the intersection of financial and trade policies with a new ideological component: a conservative reaction to the radicalism unleashed by the French Revolution. Yet, Pitt was not a doctrinaire conservative. Just as his illustrious forebear had been flexible in his thinking, so, too, was Pitt the Younger. In his contest with revolutionary France he espoused a brand of conservative *Realpolitik* that marked him out from the more doctrinaire opponents of the revolution.

Pragmatism, as DEREK BEALES (Cambridge) outlined eruditely, was likewise at the heart of the war and peace policies practiced by the subject of the next paper, the Emperor Joseph II, whose willingness to undertake military actions was constrained by a healthy sense of reality and *raison d'etat*. If this meant that the younger Pitt and Joseph had something in common, Professor BEALES was also keen to stress a theme common to Joseph and Frederick the Great: both enjoyed a high degree of unity of command. However, whereas Professor BLANNING had argued that this enhanced Frederick's successes as a war leader, Professor BEALES was less sanguine about its usefulness for Joseph. He, too, had control over domestic and military affairs, notwithstanding the important influence of his chancellor Kaunitz, but in his case 'it did not work out well', leading neither to great victories nor great enhancements of territory or prestige.

The third session took the conference into the nineteenth century and brought even more scope for the discussion of pragmatism versus realism in war leadership. The session began with a detailed paper on one of the towering figures of the era, British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, who THOMAS STAMM-KUHLMANN (Greifswald) characterised as an exponent of the application of a doctrinaire moral universalism to questions of foreign policy and war. This trait, it was ably and convincingly suggested, did not make

Gladstone a particularly effective war leader, as this author observed in the subsequent commentary, and it also involved a risk of hypocrisy. As Professor STAMM-KUHLMANN noted, Gladstone's interventionist policy in Egypt sat uneasily with his proclaimed principles, especially as Gladstone stood to benefit financially from the action as a shareholder in the Suez Canal Company. In diametric opposition to Gladstone's philosophy of foreign policy stands that of Otto von Bismarck, a statesman who represents for many the archetypal exponent and practitioner of a foreign and military policy based upon undiluted *Realpolitik*. While this particular image was (rightly, in my view) not questioned in the highly entertaining paper by Dr KARINA URBACH, several aspects of the Bismarck 'myth' were opened to thorough and overdue scrutiny. Foremost amongst these was Bismarck's self-portrayal as a war leader in the dual sense of the phrase. Bismarck undoubtedly took his country to war; on three occasions between 1864 and 1870, he either allowed disputes to escalate unnecessarily into armed conflict or, alternatively, he actively engineered such conflicts with his neighbours. However, he was no soldier. Although nearly always pictured in uniform, Bismarck had almost no record of military service and brought very little military knowledge to the role of Minister-President of Prussia. Thus, while he did confront Moltke over the conduct of the latter stages of the Franco-Prussian War, a dispute that Bismarck magnified in his memoirs, this was essentially a turf war over the boundary between grand strategy and operational considerations. It was also a dispute that was ultimately arbitrated by King Wilhelm I. As Dr URBACH concluded, Bismarck was, therefore, in no sense a military leader, even if he was a very successful war leader.

The next session considered the question of war leadership in the context of the First World War. The two figures under examination could not have been more different. On the British side was David Lloyd George. As KEITH ROBBINS

(Lampeter) explained, in a paper that shared some of the rhetorical strengths of its subject, Lloyd George found himself at the head of the British government, despite an earlier reputation as a pacifist little Englander, because he was dynamic figure with a renowned capacity to 'get things done.' Whether or not this reputation is fully deserved has recently been contested and to some extent qualified in the historical literature. Yet, there is no contesting Professor ROBBIN'S clearly expressed and convincing view that, in wartime, he was the 'man of the hour'. Kaiser Wilhelm II, by contrast, was best known in peace time for avoiding hard work, acting the dilettante, and, in so far as he did anything doing the wrong thing. As CHRISTOPHER CLARKE (Cambridge) acknowledged at the very outset of his paper, he has long been characterized as a man who, despite his delusions of grandeur, had little to contribute in wartime. Certainly, Kaiser Wilhelm did not prove the war leader that he had envisaged in his peacetime day dreams, but equally, as was illustrated in (often amusing) detail, this did not make him a *quantité négligeable*. His patronage for and support of Erich von Falkenhayn, for example, kept the latter in the position of Chief of the General Staff despite years of aggressive campaigning against him by bitter rivals. Likewise, it was the Kaiser's decision in favour of unrestricted submarine warfare that was decisive in instituting this most misguided of policies. Yet, if he was more important than is sometimes portrayed this did not make him an effective war leader, whereas Lloyd George, for all his faults, did.

The final session concentrated on the Second World War. While a large number of issues were raised in the two papers, the key theme that ran through the session was the question of charisma. As KLAUS LARRES (Ulster) acknowledged in the case of Winston Churchill and WOLFRAM PYTA (Stuttgart) confirmed in the case of Hitler, these two key protagonists in the bloodiest of twentieth century conflicts both had enormous presence and the ability to captivate. In Churchill's case,

this was an enormous asset given that a significant part of his war-winning strategy consisted of alliance building. For Hitler, too, it was an essential asset and a significant part of his political genius that he used force of personality to shape events, a fact made especially necessary in the context of war by the inadequacy of his military training and the imperfections in his military understanding. In a perceptive commentary, JONATHAN HASLAM (Cambridge) added the figure of Stalin – another forceful character – into the equation. The Soviet leader had, of course, been taken in by Hitler; he would also misread Britain by dint of his assessment of Churchill. Impressed by Churchill's dogged refusal to give in despite all the odds, he was convinced until at least late 1944 that such a determination of spirit would make Britain an important post-war power factor. Such was the power of Charisma.

As the conference clearly demonstrated, much to the profit of all who took part, across the better part of two centuries, there have been important developments, as well as some common features, in the art of war leadership. As, despite continuous and growing popular aspirations for a more peaceful world, it seems likely that war will continue to be an ever-present human failing, there is much to be learnt from the example studied here.

Conference overview:

Einführung/Introduction Brendan Simms/Karina Urbach

1) Managing multiple fronts: the Seven Years War

Chair: Franz Bosbach (Duisburg-Essen) / Commentary: Glyn Redworth (Manchester)

Tim Blanning (Cambridge) – Frederick the Great

Brendan Simms (Cambridge) – William Pitt the Elder: Leadership at home and abroad during the Great War for the Empire

Diskussion/Discussion

2) Reforming Leadership in War

Chair: Oliver Walton / Commentary: John Davis (London)

Frank Lothar Kroll (Chemnitz) - Pitt the Younger

Derek Beales (Cambridge) – Joseph II: wars intended, prevented and unexpected

Diskussion

3) Civil Leadership in an age of popular wars

Chair / Commentary: Matthew Seligmann (Northampton)

Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann (Greifswald) – Gladstone: Morality in the Age of popular Wars

Karina Urbach (London) - Bismarck: Der Kriegsdienstverweigerer als Kriegsherr

Diskussion/Discussion

4) Not leaving it to the generals: leadership in World War I.

Chair / Commentary: Andreas Fahrmeir (Frankfurt/Main)

Keith Robbins (Lampeter) – David Lloyd George: "the Welsh Wizard" who won the war?

Chris Clark (Cambridge) – Wilhelm II

Diskussion/Discussion

5) Political leadership in Total War

Chair: Magnus Brechtken (Nottingham)/Commentary: Jonathan Haslam (Cambridge)

Klaus Larres (Ulster/Nordirland) – Churchill: Flawed War Leader or Charismatic Visionary?

Wolfram Pyta (Stuttgart) – "Der Gefreite als größter Feldherr aller Zeiten?" – Funktion und Legitimation von Hitlers Kriegscharisma

Diskussion / Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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