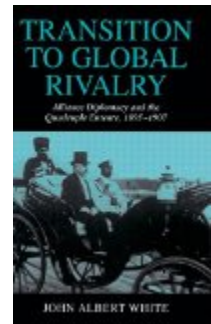


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John Albert White.** *Transition to Global Rivalry: Alliance Diplomacy and the Quadruple Entente, 1895-1907.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xxiii + 299 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-47445-0.

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## A Wider Picture

Diplomatic histories dealing with the twenty years before the outbreak of the First World War generally focus on the creation of and interactions between two opposing blocs: the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Britain, and Russia). John Albert White, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Hawaii and the author of *The Diplomacy of the Russo-Japanese War* (Princeton, 1964), wishes to expand this view. In particular, he wants the reader to take a more global view. For him, the creation of what he terms the Quadruple Entente (France, Britain, Russia, and Japan) was the essence of the diplomatic revolution which occurred in the period between 1895 and 1907.

White bases his study upon a wide range of British primary sources and a large number of secondary sources in English, French, German, and Russian. Although seemingly impressive, White's research suffers from two defects. First, his selection of primary documents, particularly private papers, is rather limited. For example, he ignores the voluminous Balfour papers, despite the fact that Balfour was at the centre of British foreign policy throughout this period, and he has not consulted the papers of either Sir Nicholas O'Connor or Sir Charles Scott, successively British ambassadors to Russia. Also, his use of the papers dealing with British defence policy is quite sporadic, and a clear picture of Britain's problems with respect to security fails to emerge. This latter is related to the second flaw in White's research: his failure, with honourable exceptions, to consult almost any of the

works published over the past ten years (and, in an important omission, John Gooch's close analysis of Britain's defence commitments published in 1974). Keith Wilson's *The Policy of the Entente* (Cambridge, 1985), whose arguments speak directly to White's topic, is notable by its absence, as is Ruddick Mackay's important study of Balfour. White has similarly not looked much at the enormous number of articles published in the past decade, preferring to rely on older work. As a result, there is a distinctly antiquarian flavour to many of his notes, and his grip on British policy is weak.

This would not matter, but for the fact that many of these recent works undermine the assumptions upon which his book is based. White, echoing the older tradition best exemplified by the works of Paul Kennedy, believes that the diplomatic revolution was brought about by the response of the Great Powers (and Japan in the Far East) to the increased power of Germany. His acceptance of the centrality of the German threat needs careful examination. My own work and that of Keith Wilson suggest (although we are at wide variance on a number of points) that British policy was largely shaped by considerations of Russia. The conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907 thus cannot be taken to be a response to a German threat, but rather as an attempt to end the long-standing Russian threat to Britain's Asiatic empire. And, whether any Quadruple Entente opposing the Triple Alliance really existed is a moot point at best.

Such caveats can also be extended to the policies of

the other Powers. All of White's evidence can be interpreted differently, and the policies of the various Great Powers can be seen to be generated by security issues peculiar to each. Only the policy of France fits neatly into White's scheme, as Paris was concerned about the rise of German power and concluded an alliance with Russia in the hope of being able to check Berlin's increasing strength. The French government was willing to end its long-time enmity with Britain because it was evident that France could not simultaneously be at odds with Germany and Britain and that the former posed a greater threat to France's position. Further, the French worked assiduously, as White demonstrates, to smooth over Russo-Japanese quarrels lest either power be weakened to the benefit of Germany. Russian policy, however, was motivated by any number of competing interests. This was particularly true with respect to Russia's extra-European policy. In the Far East, Russia had clear imperialist designs on Manchuria, largely fueled by the economic policies of the Russian finance minister, Sergei Witte. In Central Asia, advocates of expansion were opposed by those who feared British encroachments, while in the Middle East and Persia, Russia hoped to establish exclusive trading zones. Only in the latter area did Germany—via the various railway schemes propagated by Berlin—play a significant role. And, with respect to Europe, where Germany certainly was of major importance to Russia, there were divided counsels, with some in St. Petersburg advocating a closer relationship with Berlin, and others called for a rapprochement with Britain.

In all of the above, events drove policy. Here, White is very helpful, and is particularly strong on untangling the complicated state of affairs on the North West frontier of India and Central Asia. Reflecting his emphasis on the German threat to European stability, White supports the traditional view that the first Moroccan crisis and the Algeiras conference were essential in the formation of the Quadruple Entente. I believe, however, that he un-

derestimates the significance of the Russo-Japanese War, which weakened Russia so severely that the balance of power was threatened, both in Europe (thus encouraging German diplomatic aggression) and in the Far East (thus strengthening the position of Japan and Britain), and further pushed Russia into accepting the British overtures which culminated in the Anglo-Russian Convention. This line of argument is supported, not only by my own work, but also by David G. Herrmann's *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, 1996) [review on H-France by J. F. V. Keiger, February 1997], which argues along the same lines while considering the military balance before 1914.

In short, this is a useful book in that it widens the nature of the discussion of pre-1914 diplomacy. However, I believe that it fails to make its point, for both the reasons outlined above and because of structural problems. The latter manifest themselves in two ways: first, the book begins and (in particular) ends, rather abruptly. There is no conclusion that wraps up the story and makes it clear just exactly what is the balance between the author's various conclusions about the genesis of the Quadruple alliance. Second, White fails to deal with the nature of decision-making in any of the states. His is very old-fashioned diplomatic history, with cardboard figures—Salisbury, Witte, Bulow, and the like—populating positions of authority. There is no discussion of how decisions came to be made, which reduces matters to a schematic approach. On the other hand, the strength of the book results from this method, since it allows White, at a manageable length, to look at the policies of a number of countries in a comprehensive fashion. This is a book sure to generate discussion, and a worthy contribution to its field.

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