

THE ARRIVAL OF THE RESIDENT DIPLOMAT

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SO much of what was once held to have been 're-born' about the year 1450 has since been shown to have been lustily alive in earlier generations that as a result historians are reluctant to attribute any notable changes at all to the period of the Renaissance. It is useful to be reminded by Professor Mattingly¹ of an institution—permanent diplomatic representation—that began and rose to something like its full height between the years 1450 and 1550.

This book is not only about a formative period in the history of diplomacy, but provides a valuable contribution to one of the most fruitful of recent approaches to the past—the study of international relations. The purpose of this study is threefold; to question the motives which led countries to be concerned with one another, to describe the means they employed to get in touch and to negotiate, and lastly to suggest the background of shared ideas against which negotiations proceeded: ideas derived from the practice of chivalry, which had provided something like an universal gentleman's code of what might and what might not be done in time of war, the study of civil law, and the continuing pressure of Christian morality formalized in the canons of the Church—three elements which did much to compensate for the lack of formal International Law.

Such a study helps to correct a too-vertical view of the period—seen in terms of the individual histories of countries—with a horizontal one; it adds what is shared to what is personal. It enables the nature of abstractions like the Empire and Christendom to be checked against the actual behaviour of states. And the Renaissance period is perhaps uniquely interesting from this point of view. Politically it is a period of real change. States are stronger than they had been during the whole course of the middle ages, wars are increasingly contagious and they lead to alliances of wider scope. It has for long been fashionable to mock the older historians who made 1494 a hinge between medieval and modern times, to gibe, for instance, at Hallam's confident

¹ *Renaissance Diplomacy*. By Garrett Mattingly. (Cape; 25s.)

assertions that 'here, while Italy is still untouched, and before as yet the first lances of France gleam along the defiles of the Alps, we close the history of the Middle Ages'. It is true that the Balance of Power which was held to emerge at this time and stamp it as modern was no real balance, but a *sauve qui peut* scramble to avoid being eaten alive; nevertheless, during the years *c.* 1450-*c.* 1550 there was a greater acceleration than at any other time towards the state of international affairs familiar by the end of the nineteenth century.

The outstanding characteristic was that the great powers became in this period so strong that the weaker ones were forced to watch them minutely; a motive largely responsible for the spread of the resident diplomat.

By 1494 France had recovered from the effects of the Hundred Years War, was rich, well armed and avid for expansion. Thanks to Charles VII and Louis XI she was more effectively administered than ever before, and her boundaries had been extended by the acquisition of Guienne, Burgundy, Provence and Brittany. She had the finest heavy cavalry in Europe, composed of a noble class educated for war and impatient with the mock glories of tourney and joust. Spain had rid herself finally of the Moors in 1492 with the conquest of Granada, and was organized as a fighting unit under Ferdinand and Isabella, even if full administrative unity still lay in the future. Poorer than France, she had a large class of men eager for pay and loot in whatever war was available. It is true that an effective army in this age required heavy infantry and that neither France nor Spain possessed any, but the Swiss, who had first demonstrated in their recent victories over the Burgundian cavalry that this arm was henceforward indispensable, were themselves available for hire. And the Lanzknechts of Germany provided a tolerable substitute. The lack of this arm, therefore, was not an obstacle to a power with cash who wanted to go to war. And towards the end of the fifteenth century, there was little to restrain France and Spain from going to war as soon as an excuse offered. The great international arbiters of earlier times, Empire and Papacy, both originally instituted, according to their publicists, to secure God's Peace, were powerless to secure it. No appeal to preserve the *status quo* would in any case have been heeded. States did not know what their 'natural' limits were; frontiers were flexible

and dubious, there was no conception that there was a definite line—ethnological, linguistic, geographical—at which expansion should stop. The accidents of inheritance and marriage, the mesh of international feudal relationships, meant that the shapes of countries changed almost generation by generation. The latter half of the fifteenth century had seen the collapse of the semi-independent empire of Charles of Burgundy, which stretched from the North Sea to the latitude of Lake Lemán, Roussillon and Cerdagne pass to Spain, the effective power of France advanced to the Mediterranean. The drift to war was not hampered by the reflection that in every state there was still much to do in the way of improving the running of internal affairs, nor by any need to obtain the consent of a wide section of the community—Renaissance wars were royal wars, dictated by no deep economic need, entered into lightly. And if states were eager for war and ready for it, there was a standing temptation in the shape of Italy, rich, divided, and invested with the double glamour of being the seat of the Papacy and the scene on which the Imperial glories of Ancient Rome had been played out. And already there were excuses for intervention: Spain was concerned—through the bastard line of Aragon—with Naples and Sicily; the French monarchs inherited claims to Naples and Milan. The temptation was yielded to in 1494; the plunge into Italy began. Scldom had such single-minded political gluttony been seen before. The Turks had momentarily occupied part of Italy in 1480, and fifty years later were besieging Belgrade, but this continued threat to Christendom was virtually forgotten. From 1494 to 1529 there was almost constant warfare in Italy.

These wars are the indispensable background to the evolution of diplomatic technique. Fear of them forced the states of Italy to send agents to watch the movements and forestall the pouncing of the great powers—mobilization being now a matter of weeks instead of months. They were accompanied by widespread diplomatic activity among the great powers themselves, the constructing of alliances, their consolidation, their breach and re-formation on different axes. The result was to change permanently the scope and the methods of negotiation and, in time, to produce a new class of professional diplomatists. A virtue of historians today is that they stress continuity; a foible that they are tempted to over-stress it. In the history of diplomacy a definite

change occurs in the Renaissance. Just as increasing pressure of business led to drastic changes in Tudor administration, increasing pressure in diplomacy led to changes which, like the Tudor changes, can be called revolutionary; the old machine could no longer cope with increased demand. It was modified accordingly.

Medieval diplomacy was conducted by embassies chosen *ad hoc* for a particular piece of business, a marriage negotiation, the settlement of a treaty, the bestowal of some honour—the Garter, or the papal *rose d'or*. The ambassadors, having concluded their business, returned home. Diplomacy was formal, occasional, and, in so far as there were no career diplomatists, amateur. This procedure suited an age when there was a long time-lag between the first rumblings of a crisis and its eruption. As the time-lag shortened, however, the leisurely, pompous processions of notables, clerical and secular, were no longer so appropriate. Their occasional activities needed to be supplemented by a resident agent who could continually put forward his employer's views and send home regular budgets of news.

Professor Mattingly, in an important article,² had already shown how the resident ambassador had come to be a commonplace in Italy during the second half of the fifteenth century. The motive here was to preserve, through constant vigilance and prompt information, the uneasy state of equipoise established in 1454 by the Peace of Lodi. And when the shadow of aggression began to glide over Italy as France rose to her full height of warlike preparation, the states of Italy tried to avert or guide this menace by sending agents to reside there. As tension grew, the number of residents multiplied, until, by the time hostilities were in swing, every country involved in them was making use of the new facility.

Though widely employed by the great as well as the lesser, more fearful powers, it was not yet clear that the resident had come to stay, nor were his employers able for a while to make the best use of him. His function as informer made him despised as something akin to a spy at the court to which he was accredited; his social status was often far below that of the Special Ambassador, and did not guarantee him respect; his employers grudged him the money he needed for bribes, for postage, even for the clothes suitable to a life at court; they discounted much of what he

² In *Speculum*, 1937.

reported as due to the lure of foreign gold or because it contradicted ideas drawn from a long tradition of hearsay and assumption. As a result, the system was not as efficient as it could have been if its makers had put more faith in it. The Italian states had good intelligence services, yet they never appreciated the vast resources of their barbarian enemies, nor ceased to believe till it was too late that a smart defeat or two would keep them out of the peninsula.

The effect of the new diplomacy on the tone of international relations is not easy to define. Machiavelli, damned by a literary brilliance that caused every counsel, no matter for how particular an occasion, to glow like an universal precept, has had his name given to an approach to politics which he described and in part codified, but certainly did not invent. It was his own diplomatic experience as the representative of a weak and irresolute state that convinced him that in a life-and-death struggle a small man must sometimes hit below the belt. But in any case he realized, as must any diplomat, that persistent deceit defeats its own purpose: 'lie seldom but lie well' was his advice to a young colleague. At the highest level, it would be hazardous to suggest that political morality was any different during the Renaissance than before or since. Whenever it is convenient to break faith, excuses are to hand: King John's scrupulousness in returning to English captivity after the inadvertent breach of his parole after Poitiers was highly uncharacteristic of his age. But at a lower level, among the diplomatists, the new residents, suspected and suspicious, unprotected by clear conventions of immunity, without the support of belonging to a definite confident caste—here there was much that was furtive, much that was crafty and oblique. And yet this is only to look at a few grubby pages in a vast book: the dispatches, reports, and relations of the residents. The bulk of them were written by conscientious, if worried men, insecure, longing to be relieved of their posts, but providing none the less a steady flow of balanced information that was often less valued by their own governments than by future historians. This is the material that Professor Mattingly has magnificently used in a work that records the history of these men up to the early seventeenth century, a task that has involved a fruitful re-interpretation of their times. That is the measure of their importance.