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H-Diplo Review Essay on **T.G. Otte**. *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865-1914*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Xiii + 437 pp. £65/\$99 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-107-00650-8.

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Kathleen Burk, University College London**

As Dr Thomas Otte warns us at the beginning, this is not traditional diplomatic history: there is no tracing of bilateral relations, no deconstruction or reconstruction of international crises. Nor is it directly analogous to what Jennifer Mori has labelled “new diplomatic history,” which, she argues, produces “more imaginative treatments of perception and self-fashioning in international politics, many dealing with issues of gender and scandal.” She is not particularly interested in looking at the “traditional concerns of diplomatic history,”¹ but is more focused on the social history of British diplomats in her period. Yet Otte’s work makes it clear that he does share some of her interests. He is teasing out the ‘mind’, the ‘mental maps’, which contributed to the making of this history. He, too, reconstructs networks, primarily professional, but also social when they impinge on the moulding of policymakers and their making of policy. Unlike Mori, however, he is concerned with national, more than with social and family, interests.

This is not a book for beginners – undergraduates should not race to acquire it. Otte assumes that the reader will know about the Hohenzollern Candidature or the ‘war-in-sight’ crisis or the nineteenth century ‘two-camp policy’ or the Haldane mission, all of which would be familiar to historians a generation ago, when the history of nineteenth century diplomacy was an important subject, but which might now be less familiar – particularly the two examples with quotation marks – to those historians, student or professional, more comfortable with or knowledgeable about the twentieth century.

¹ Jennifer Mori, *The Culture of Diplomacy: Britain in Europe, c. 1750-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 2-3. This is a very interesting book, and enjoyable to read.

What might equally seem strange to historians of the twentieth century was the fervent nineteenth-century belief in the Balance of Power. A.J.P. Taylor, in his *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918*, put it very well: “Ideologies were a minor theme in the seventy years between 1848 and 1918; and the Balance of Power worked with calculation almost as pure as in the days before the French revolution. It seemed to be the political equivalent of the laws of economics, both self-operating.”² But it was a ‘perpetual quadrille’, as each foreign ministry kept a close eye on all of the others: a minute analysis of every casual phrase or hint or allusion has a long pedigree. One element of this ‘law’ was the so-called doctrine of compensation, i.e., if one Great Power acquired new territory or rights, other Great Powers who were interested were entitled to compensation of one sort or another. But the concept of a Balance of Power was discredited by the First World War, and one reads no more about it. But whether automatic or not, the concept continues to be commanding – or else what was containment about? It is just called something else.

Yet in the nineteenth century, both the concept and its name dominated all European Foreign Offices or Ministries or Chancelleries, particularly those of the acknowledged Great Powers. The interference of others, such as newspapers or electorates, was not welcomed: as Earl Russell, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, said in March 1864, “the Great Powers had not the habit of consulting populations when questions affecting the Balance of Power had to be settled.”³ Rather than write a traditional diplomatic history, then, Otte has tried to reconstruct the British ‘Foreign Office mind’, a term, as he points out, which was very much a part of contemporary political parlance, and which he defines, in the words of a French Ambassador, as “*une certaine habitude du monde*,” a departmental view of the world. (6) This was made up of the underlying principles of British foreign policy and the ‘unspoken assumptions’, such as that articulated by Earl Russell as quoted above, which went to make up the ‘élite perceptions’ of those who constituted the Office. This élite was drawn from a particular social class, those who were ‘gentlemen’, and who made up a close fellowship, and the focus of this book is thus “firmly on the clerks who wandered the corridors of the Foreign Office and the diplomatists who represented their country abroad.” (4)

How does one ascertain this view from the windows of the Foreign Office? Otte sets out his methodology early on. “By its very nature, the mind is an elusive phenomenon. For the historian, there is no corpse upon which a scholarly post-mortem can be performed. But there are traces and footprints, sometimes even only the merest whiff of a suggestion. To appreciate their significance is not to ignore ‘the evidential and *événementiel* nature’⁴ of history. On the contrary, there seems to be more truth to be discovered in contemporary

² A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1954), p. xx.

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴ D.C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America and Britain's Place in the World, 1900-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 5.

perceptions than in later theories and concepts. It is in the private letters and diaries of Victorian and Edwardian diplomatists, and in the official minutes and memoranda, that these footprints can be found.” (5)

The structure of the book is organised by political generations, not least because contemporaries “were very much aware of belonging to different generations, and ... this was a frequent point of reference for them. In the private correspondence of British diplomats of the period, references to generational experiences are frequent and manifold.”(18) Generational shifts are observable at this level; they are formed by common, formative social or political experiences, not by age. They are fluid, with a common frame of reference including a rupture with the past. In general, those diplomats who were active until the late 1860s to the early 1870s had their foreign policy outlook shaped by Lord Palmerston; Otte calls this the ‘Palmerstonian generation’. The next generation was made up of the high-Victorians, whose formative experience was the Crimean War, and who attained senior positions during the late 1870s. And, finally, there were the Edwardians, whose foreign policy views were formed during the period of ‘flux’ in Great Power politics in the 1890s, and who moved into senior positions from the middle of that decade onwards.

What were the assumptions and modes of thought which mostly defined these members of the Foreign Office? First, they were, not surprisingly, primarily focused on the practicalities of international politics. Second, whilst more emphasis had traditionally been placed on ‘character’ than on raw intelligence, in the course of the century, and particularly from the 1870s, there was a shift from an emphasis on moral qualities to intellectual ability. A university education, and not just a public (English private) school education, was now seen as excellent preparation; not only that, but the study of history, for diplomats, soon displaced that of classics. As Otte points out, for the Victorians and Edwardians in general, modern history was the great storehouse of political lessons and experience, and of practical wisdom. Thus, one of those assumptions was that the members of the Foreign Office would be aware of the context and lessons of history and could apply them. Third, there were strong assumptions about national ‘honour’, which reflected concerns for Great Britain’s international standing and influence: “‘honour’ and ‘prestige’ were a form of ‘soft power’, and a currency readily convertible into real influence.” (396) Fourth, there was an assumption of Britain’s innate strength, based on its political and financial power and, usually, on the strength of the Royal Navy. But to the Foreign Office, its ability to project this power usually depended on equilibrium amongst the Great Powers, and Britain preferred negotiations to the exercise of military power. Putting together coalitions was one of her innate strengths.

Fifth, the European balance as such was not the Foreign Office’s principal concern. Britain was a global power, and was thus acutely aware of the relationship between the configuration of Powers in Europe and its interests abroad. For most of the period, the Office assumed, and worked on that assumption, that Russia was the most threatening of the Powers. As for France, there was a consistent assumption of French flightiness and insincerity, whilst the Office viewed Germany as essentially weak internationally.

The sixth assumption arose from an insular outlook: based on its experience of the Crimean War, Britain assumed that other Powers would also be constrained from initiating sustained armaments programmes either on financial grounds or because of domestic political difficulties. After all, classic economic liberalism took it for granted that military expenditure was inherently wasteful. And finally, the seventh assumption, which “ran like a red thread through the woof and warp of the ‘Foreign Office mind’”, (405) was that the rising middle classes in Europe as in Great Britain would make an active foreign policy more difficult. Only the Foreign Office could provide continuity against the emotions and vagaries of the middle classes, and the politicians who responded to their desires.

With this organising principle, Otte looks closely at the events of the period, concentrating on the actions and reactions of the Office and of the representatives abroad. The politicians figure primarily in terms of whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposed policies of the Office, including their assessment of the quality and power of the Foreign Secretary of the day. An example of the first was Salisbury’s attempts in 1878 to work without the Foreign Office, which appears to have ended by the end of 1879. An example of the second was their contempt for the second Earl Granville, who seemed unable to take a decision (“poor pottering old G[ranville] who, if by chance he ever made up his mind, changed it again before twelve hours were over”). (150) As with most fellowships, members trusted and approved of each other rather more than they did of outsiders. In Mori’s terms, they constituted their social network.

This is a dense but elegantly-written book, very enjoyable to read for those who like this sort of book, and I do. It is what it says it is: no more and no less. But it does share elements of both the traditional and the new diplomatic history (although there are no women in Otte’s book). Otte has based his work on a hundred different sets of private papers of diplomats of the period, some of which he himself discovered, which he interweaves with the official papers to produce a compelling argument. One wonders whether it will ever be possible to replicate this model with regard to the post-1945 State Department or Foreign Office, given that the age of letter-writing seems to have passed. Sadly, the answer is probably no.

Born in California and educated at Berkeley and Oxford, **Kathleen Burk** is the Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at University College London. Primarily a specialist in Anglo-American relations, she has also written extensively on finance and foreign policy, as well as on the history and culture of wine. She is the author of seven books and the editor of four, amongst which are *Britain, America and the Sinews of War 1914-1918* (1985), *“Good-bye, Great Britain”: the 1976 IMF Crisis* (1992), *Troublemaker: The Life and History of A.J.P. Taylor* (2000) and *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America From the Beginning* (2007). She is currently writing a book on the interactions of the British and American empires.

H-Diplo *Review Essay*

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