



Britain, Russia and the Road to the First World War: The Fateful Embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff (1903-16) (Ashgate Studies in First World War History)

Marina, Dr Soroka

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For much of the later nineteenth-century Britain regarded Russia as its main international rival, particularly as regarded the security of its colonial possessions in India. Yet, by 1907 Russia's political revolution, financial collapse and military defeat by Japan, transformed the situation, resulting in an Anglo-Russian rapprochement. As this book makes clear, whilst international affairs lay at the root of this new relationship, personal factors also played an important role in reversing many years of mutual animosity and suspicion. In particular the study explores the influence of the liberal anglophile Count Aleksandr Benckendorff, the Russian ambassador in London between 1903 and 1916.

By 1905, Russia's multiple weaknesses required a prolonged period of external peace by eliminating frictions with the principal rival powers, Britain and Germany, while France and Britain realised that a British rapprochement with Russia would be necessary to counter Germany's power. Benckendorff, as one of the most important figures in the Russian diplomatic service, persuaded Nicholas II and his Foreign Minister, V.N. Lamsdorff, to drop their objections to various long-standing British demands in order to pave the way for a Triple Entente. Although the overarching Russian strategy was conceived as 'balancing' the imperial rivalries of Britain and Germany, numerous factors - not least Benckendorff's energetic pro-British stance - upset the scales and resulted in a stand-off with the Central Powers.

Demonstrating how Benckendorff's fear of losing Britain's friendship made him oppose all Russia's efforts at improving Russo-German relations, this book underlines the pro-Entente policy's role in setting Russia on the road to war. For when the Sarajevo crisis struck; there was now no hope of appealing to German goodwill to help defuse the situation. Instead Russia's status within the Entente depended on a show of determination and strength, which lead inexorably to a disaster of the Great War.

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