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Dealing with the Great Bear: Edward VII’s Visit to Russia

Introduction

In the aftermath of the development of the Entente Cordiale, and other international developments, the British government was modifying its foreign policy in the direction of a new entente with the Tsarist state. For most of the nineteenth century, Russia had been seen as the greatest threat to Britain’s imperial interests. In the post-‘splendid isolation’ diplomatic world with which this volume is concerned, Britain had been reconsidering its imperial over-stretch, and as a result, during 1907, Britain and Russia came to a series of diplomatic agreements. This took the shape of a substantial number of individual treaties dealing with a range of aspects of Anglo-Russian imperial tensions in regions stretching from Afghanistan to Persia. Effectively, it was the ending of the Great Game. The resulting Anglo-Russian Entente, similar to that Britain had with France and Spain, was more to do with a lessening of tension than with formal treaties, however. In this particular process, there seemed to be neither a role nor a need for royal diplomacy. The Anglo-Russian Entente was achieved without a state visit. However, in its aftermath, a state visit was made in 1908 by Edward VII to Russia, followed by a 1909 return formal visit by the Tsar to Britain. These visits are significant, especially the former, because of the further insight given into the pomp and ceremonial aspects of royal diplomacy.

Emphasis has been placed on the appreciation that Edward VII had shown, in the first seven years of his reign, of the ceremonial aspects of his encounters with his fellow royals. However, this cannot be taken too far. In Germany, he was consistently irritated by his nephew’s insistence on rituals and protocol, and the public dimension in which these were
performed and reported via the German media.¹ He had been happier with the management of his state visits to France, and also to Italy and – most recently – to Scandinavia. When visiting France, Edward had been the only monarch involved, since France had become a republic. In Italy, as in Scandinavia, there was no long tradition of courtly formalities associated with ancient rituals and long-entrenched ceremonial court practices. While splendour had been appreciated, there had not been particular expectations of ostentatious display of royal status and privilege as being essential to the success of a royal visit.

The Italian visit had required ceremony, but there was no tradition to draw on, and thus it was a matter of creating (or inventing) new forms of ceremony to suit the delicate balance required to accompany a visit between a Protestant King and the Roman Catholic Pope within a wider state visit to a newly powerful but originally minor European ruling house (that of Savoy). While the Spanish visit would have required elaborate ceremonial and a careful consideration of the niceties had that visit been to Madrid itself, Edward VII had avoided this by staying aboard his yacht. Aboard his own royal vessel, he had been in charge of the ceremonial possible within the confined spaces of a yacht. However, the visit to the Romanov court involved a visit to a monarchy which enjoyed a sustained tradition of ceremonial practices governing monarch-to-monarch encounters dating back at least to Peter the Great.

The Anglo-Russian entente

The Foreign Secretary from 1905, Sir Edward Grey, was responsible for advancing the negotiations for the Anglo-Russian Entente. Although the decision to pursue an agreement with Russia had actually been made as early as 1903, the negotiations were put on hold during the Russo-Japanese War.² It seems possible that Edward himself may have sought to

² Thanks to the Anglo-Japanese alliance, negotiations with Russia over issues to do with Britain’s imperial tensions had to be suspended.