
Since the 1970s, works on Jacobite history have flowed with wild abandon from presses around the globe. Historians like E. Cruickshanks, D. Széchi, P. Monod, J. Black, B. Lenman, M. Pittock, and F. McLynn have cast their eye upon issues of politics and culture, primarily within an exclusively domestic framework. Too often these works have left the impression that the Jacobite movement was little more than a noble and chivalric, but ultimately doomed, attempt by the ‘Children of the Mist’, a ragtag band of Highland and Irish misfits, to affect the restoration of the exiled Stuart monarchy. Likewise, the exiled monarchs, especially James III, with whom Wills is primarily concerned, are portrayed as enigmatic, but ineffective leaders, making great plans but consistently failing to follow through. Rebecca Wills’ *The Jacobites in Russia 1715-1750*, taking as its theme the period of the Jacobite diaspora, suggests that the Jacobite movement, as it relates to early eighteenth century Russia, was far more nuanced and complex than previous work has allowed. In the course of her work, Wills examines the nature of Russo-Jacobite relations - not only in a Russian context, but in a broader European one – and the crisis of identity facing the men who were both Jacobite and Russian.

Though some historians have begun to look at Jacobitism in a wider European context (notably, D. Széchi), this remains an under-researched, but fertile, area of study. One aspect of this ‘European context’ is the Jacobite diaspora, an event that reached its height in the aftermath of the Rising of 1715, often considered to have been the rebellion with the greatest chance of success. In the wake of the ’15, high profile Jacobites fled Britain, seeking both refuge and career opportunities in countries like Sweden, Prussia and Russia. In these countries, which were looking to establish themselves as ‘great powers’, Jacobite military and political skills were in high demand. This was especially true in Russia, and the period from 1716 to 1730 (encompassing the reigns of Peter the Great, Catherine I,
and Peter II) was the most dynamic and encouraging for Russo-Jacobite relations.

Russia was particularly attractive to Jacobite exiles like Peter Lacy, James Keith, Thomas Gordon, William Hay, and Sir Robert Erskine, Peter the Great’s personal physician. In part this was due to the dire financial situation of James III’s exiled court – the Stuart king simply could not afford to retain those men who supported his restoration in 1715. Peter the Great, however, could. Moreover, Peter’s Westernisation policies opened up many opportunities for Jacobite exiles, especially in the military. Russia’s highly selective military system ensured that, though it employed proportionally fewer foreigners and fewer Jacobites than elsewhere in Europe, those Jacobites who met the high recruitment standards ascended to the top of their fields, wielding power and influence far beyond their numeric strength. With the active support of the Tsar, the Jacobite community in Russia flourished, contributing to the further deterioration of Anglo-Russian relations (already significantly damaged by the ‘Gyllenborg conspiracy’, the Atterbury plot, the embassy of Daniel O’Brien, ‘first Jacobite Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary to the Emperor Peter I’, and the concerted effort of both Russian envoys and exiled Jacobites to actively recruit from the British Navy). With the death of Peter the Great in 1725, the Jacobites lost one of their primary supporters. The fact that no such Jacobite rising succeeded (or was even attempted) with Russian support between 1715-1725 is not, according to Wills, indicative of Russian failure to cooperate, rather than the fact that, given the complicated nature of European politics at the time, no rising would have been feasible.

Wills notes that many historians have traditionally asserted that, after Peter I’s death, Jacobite activity in Russia ceased immediately. However, looking at contemporary British propaganda, Wills shows that the converse was true, given the frequency with which the ‘Jacobite threat’ was invoked by Sir Robert Walpole’s propaganda machine. Although such assertions were more often than not made to conceal continued political and territorial rivalries in the Baltic, this manoeuvre would have been wholly ineffective had the Jacobites movement
truly been defunct. Nevertheless, though far from insignificant, there simply was not sufficient support for a Stuart restoration anywhere in Europe – Austria refused to support the Jacobites in a time of peace, Sweden was forced to accede to the Treaty of Hanover (at considerable financial cost to Britain), France withheld support in the face of Hanoverian supremacy, and Spain was hampered by military inadequacy. This basic lack of support was compounded by the events of Peter II's reign, during which Britain and Russia drew closer together politically, a process that culminated in the renewal of Anglo-Russian diplomatic relations in 1731.

This realignment of Russian and British interests confronted Jacobites with a difficult situation, where any activity on behalf of James III (and, therefore, against the Hanoverian regime) would conflict with their service to the Russian monarch (now Britain's ally). Though many Jacobites, like James Keith, simply shifted their attention from Jacobite activity to matters of career, thereby skirting a conflict of interest by allowing Jacobite interests to lie fallow, the embassy of James Fitzjames, Spanish duke of Liria and loyal Jacobite, demonstrated that, in the fickle arena of international politics, professional obligation and personal allegiance were neither mutually exclusive nor indicative of disloyalty. James III himself often praised the work of exiled Jacobites in Russia, lauding their military service, perhaps in the vain hope that one day their talents would be successful channelled into a Stuart restoration. However, even renewed and exclusive devotion to the growing Russian empire was not enough to protect Jacobite officers from the rampant xenophobia of the reigns of Anna Ivanovna and Elisabeth. Wills suggests that, as Jacobite officers were skilled disproportionately to native talent, Russia may not have succeeded in the conflicts of the 1730s and '40s without the critical leadership of men like Thomas Gordon, Peter Lacy and James Keith. Facing the resignation of many prominent leaders, both Anna and Elisabeth attempted to curb anti-foreign agitation. Despite a measure of success, as many as eight hundred foreign officers left Russia for comparable positions elsewhere in Europe. Finally, even James Keith, perhaps the most influential and prominent Jacobite in
the post-Petrine period, could no longer tolerate the hostile Russian atmosphere. He fled to Prussia in 1747, depriving the Russian military of its most able commander and providing Prussia with an invaluable intelligence source on Russian military affairs. Thus, by the end of the 1740s, Jacobite influence had decreased significantly and was no longer a legitimate threat to European political stability; nonetheless, the overall impact of Jacobite influence was to Russia’s lasting gain, as it helped to establish Russia as one of Europe’s Great Powers.

Without a doubt, *The Jacobites in Russia 1715-1750* makes an invaluable contribution to an under-developed body of literature on international Jacobitism. Her writing is detailed, organized, and thoroughly-researched, drawing upon a vast quantity of archival material from Scottish, English, and Russian collections. Russian history has often been neglected by British historians, largely due to the language barrier, the inaccessibility of primary sources, and an unfortunate tendency to underestimate Russia’s significance in both British and international politics. Rebecca Wills’ work demonstrates that this need not, and should not, continue to be the case.

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