NOTE

1812: STEIN, ALEXANDER I AND THE CRUSADE AGAINST NAPOLEON

HANS A. SCHMITT

In Helmuth Roessler's recent, brief, and excellent biography of Baron vom Stein, the reader encounters once again the thesis that the exiled German patriot persuaded Czar Alexander I to carry his war against Napoleon beyond the borders of Russia. This thesis, which goes back to Stein's first chronicler, G. H. Pertz, was accepted by the latter's contemporary Carl von Kaltenborn, then by Theodor von Bernhardi, and finally by the two outstanding Stein biographers of our century: Max Lehmann and Gerhard Ritter. Among Anglo-Saxon scholars, the Englishman John Seeley was a qualified supporter of the German contention, while the American Guy Stanton Ford went so far as to explain Alexander's policies in 1812 by the simple affirmation that Stein was there. The late Erich Botzenhart, in his monumental edition of the Stein Nachlass, struck a note of caution and admitted that it cannot be proved by documents to what extent Stein's influence on Alexander was an effective one. But while subsequent writers used the documents he had assembled so carefully and edited with such distinction, they continued to overlook his qualifications. A Russian exile, Constantin de Grunwald, writing in France, concluded enthusiastically: "Stein's correspondence with Alexander discloses with all clarity the threads of the plot by which, from the moment of his arrival in Russia the German statesman set himself to lead Alexander unconsciously beyond the self-regarding objects of Russian nationalism." Two German works of recent provenance, the volumes by Roessler and Goerlitz, likewise exemplify the traditional approach.

In Alexander's life the German problem was only one of many. His biographers, but little concerned with the entire episode, seem disposed to accept the German version. M. J. Bogdanovich and N. K. Shilder made extensive use of Pertz. In the opinion of Shilder, foreign influences at court were to be deplored rather than emphasized, and Stein was given little space. Among popular biographers of the "enigmatic Czar" one must not look for serious historical findings.

---

2 G. H. Pertz, Das Leben des Ministers Freiherr vom Stein (Berlin, 1850-55). Vol. III.
3 Carl von Kaltenborn, Geschichte der deutschen Bundesverhältnisse und Einheitsbestrebungen von 1806 bis 1856... (Berlin, 1857), I, 86.
5 Freiherr vom Stein (Leipzig, 1902-5), III, 173.
6 Stein, eine politische Biographie (Stuttgart, 1931), II, 364.
7 J. R. Seeley, Life and times of Stein or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic age (Cambridge, 1878), III, 21.
9 Erich Botzenhart (ed.), Freiherr vom Stein, Briefwechsel, Denkschriften und Aufzeichnungen (Berlin, 1931-37), IV, vi.
10 Constantin de Grunwald, Napoleon's nemesis, the life of Baron Stein (Tr. by Charles F. Atkinson) (New York, 1936), p. 209.
11 Walter Goerlitz, Stein, Staatsmann und Reformer (Frankfurt, 1949), pp. 342-54.
12 M. J. Bogdanovich, Istoria Tsarstvovania Imperatora Aleksandra I i Rossii v ego vremia (St. Petersburg, 1871).
13 N. K. Shilder, Imperator Aleksandr I, ego shizn i tsarstvovanie (St. Petersburg, 1903-5).
14 Ibid., III, 275; note also the castigation by a Pole of Alexander's "Holstein-Gottorp policies" in K. Waliszewski, Le règne d'Alexandre Ier (Paris, 1923-25), II, 203.
15 Cf. Maurice Paléologue, The enigmatic Czar...
Oswald Backus’ doctoral dissertation, completed at Yale in 1949, seems to be the only large-scale study in this area animated by the same conscientious caution that guided Botzenhart. As a “neutral” treating both protagonists in conjunction, Backus was less prone to insist on an explicit verdict. He pointed to the abortive alliance projects of 1811 and the maintenance of Justus von Gruner as a Russian agent in Austria in 1812. Without overrating these developments he nevertheless concluded that “Stein’s contribution seems to have been that of confirming Alexander in his conviction by his insistence upon entering Germany . . . “, a significant retreat from the original German thesis.

How valid is the contention that Stein played a major part in Russian policy-making just prior to and during the campaigns of 1812-13? Was he needed to convert Alexander from the liberator of Russia into the liberator of Germany and Europe?

The first important exchange of views between the two men occurred on September 18, 1808 at Königsberg, where the Czar halted on his way to Erfurt. Stein used this occasion to urge upon Alexander that the time for a concerted thrust against Napoleon had arrived: Spain was checking France in the south, Austria was gathering her strength for another effort to throw off the indignities of Bonapartist hegemony, England was stronger than ever. It remained for Russia and Prussia to throw their decisive weight into the scales. These views seem to have made some impression. Although the Czar continued his journey according to plan, Stein was ordered to Leipzig, so that he might be within reach during the meeting with the French emperor.

From this juncture Stein could have risen to that eminence in the councils of Alexander which has often been claimed for him. But by the time the Czar left Königsberg the French police had intercepted a highly incriminating letter from the baron to Prince Wittgenstein, advocating rebellion and violence in the former Prussian province of Westphalia. At the request of the king of Prussia the Czar agreed to pacify the outraged Bonaparte, and Stein’s usefulness as an adviser ended before it had begun. To prevent retaliation against Prussia he resigned and left Königsberg on December 5. Eleven days later Napoleon ordered his arrest, but Stein escaped to a precarious Austrian sanctuary thanks only to a flagrant breach of security by the French ambassador in Berlin.

Meanwhile, the Czar had been hearing from friends who opposed the French alliance. “Napoleon has but one goal,” Prince Adam Czartoryski had written before Erfurt, “that is to abase, subject and destroy all existing governments, so that his own and that of his dynasty will become all-powerful. Thus he must of necessity wish to degrade Russia.” To rouse Alexander further, the Polish magnate had conjured up the spectre of an “organized” Poland, whose emancipated peasantry would serve as Napoleon’s spearhead against Russia. Outwardly such counsel produced no change of course. As late as May 1811, an observer on the periphery, John Q. Adams, reported to President Monroe that Alexander was resisting all advice urging him to break with France. But a witness who had closer access to the Czar told a different story. In July 1810 King Frederick William III’s aide, Major Wranget, was sent to St. Petersburg to announce to the Russian court the death of Queen Louise of Prussia. According to the Prussian officer the Czar was upset by the news: “I swear to you,” he is reported to have said, “to avenge her death, and her murderer [Napoleon] is to pay for it.” Then he told Wranget in the strictest confidence that he

---

17 Ibid., p. 141. Italics supplied.
18 Botzenhart, II, 514-17; Lehmann, II, 566-68.
23 Worthington C. Ford, Writings of John Quincy Adams (New York, 1918-17), IV, 74.
was arming with might and main, not to assist Napoleon in a chimerical conquest of India, but to attack France. "By 1814 I can, according to my most exact calculations, enter the lists with a well-equipped army of 400,000. With 200,000 men I shall cross the Oder, while another 200,000 will cross the Vistula." At that moment, he concluded, Prussia was to rise and join Austria and the other German states in following the Russian lead.\textsuperscript{24} In 1811, the year in which the American minister saw him persist in his friendship for France, the Czar wrote his sister that it was useless to expect concessions from Napoleon unless diplomacy was backed by force. Russian policies would have to be guided by this fact.\textsuperscript{25} In the light of Wrangel's report, even the famous letter to Bonaparte written June 26, 1812, which promised to forgive and forget provided that French troops evacuated Russian soil, takes on new meaning. War having come two years before he was ready, Alexander obviously wanted to postpone the conflict, if at all possible, until he could fight on his own terms.\textsuperscript{26}

There is no evidence of Stein's taking a hand in Russian affairs between December 1808, and April 1812. There is, however, ample reason to look with favor upon Marc Raeff's undocumented conclusion that "... more particularly after Erfurt, the Tsar's dominant preoccupation became to prepare himself for the ultimate conflict with France."\textsuperscript{27} Alexander seems indeed to have planned the destruction of Bonaparte before the violation of Russian soil and without pressure from German patriots, including Stein.

It is true that Alexander wrote Stein on April 8, 1812, requesting his advice on how to meet the emergency of invasion. The letter, it must be added, was not a clear-cut summons to join the court, though it contained that suggestion.\textsuperscript{28} Why it was written at all remains a mystery. Did Alexander remember Stein, or did someone else remind him of the exiled minister? Stein followed the call and arrived at Vilna on June 12, 1812, joining the throng of distinguished Russians and foreigners assisting the emperor in planning the war. He seems to have been generous with advice, but there is no indication that it was heeded.\textsuperscript{29} After the Czar left the army for St. Petersburg, Stein followed. He established himself in the capital as spokesman for the German cause, and it is worth noting that no contemporary claimed for him any other position.\textsuperscript{30} His own diary for 1812 is completely silent on the subject of his relations with Alexander.\textsuperscript{31} It is impossible to find even a shred of evidence on which to rest Gerhard Ritter's claim that Alexander found in Stein the "reliable moral support which he was not able to find so easily in his Slavic surroundings."\textsuperscript{32} We may rather accept the testimony of one of the Czar's aides who described the exiled statesman's mission in these terms: "All [of Stein's] desires were concentrated on one thought: to see the triumph of his fatherland and the humbling of France." In fact it would seem that he had no other subject of conversation, no other concern. "One could liken him unto Cato, who con-

\textsuperscript{24} Friedrich Thimme, "Zur Vorgeschichte der Konvention von Tauroggen," Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preussischen Geschichte, XIII (1900), 263. For confirmation of the soundness of Wrangel's recollections see by the same author "Die geheime Mission des Flugeladjutanten von Wrangel," \textit{Ibid.}, XXI (1908), 199-213.


\textsuperscript{26} Albert Vandal, \textit{Napoléon et Alexandre Ier} (Paris, 1897-98), III, 494.

\textsuperscript{27} Marc Raeff, \textit{Michael Speransky, statesman of imperial Russia, 1772–1839} (The Hague, 1957), p. 188.

\textsuperscript{28} For Alexander's letter and Stein's reply see Botzenhart, IV, 1-9.

\textsuperscript{29} On the question of Bernadotte's landing on the mainland: Botzenhart, IV, 31-33; Ritter, II, 148-49; on his unsuccessful demand for the dismissal of Romanzoff: Botzenhart, IV, 87.


\textsuperscript{32} Ritter, II, 135.
stantly urged the destruction of Carthage.33 This singlemindedness, though impressive, was bound to limit Stein's usefulness as an adviser. The baron himself was never too sure of his effectiveness. In his letters of that year jubilant optimism alternated with sudden fits of extreme depression.34

The entry of Austria into the alliance served to restrict Stein's influence even more. Metternich and Alexander disliked one another but in many respects their views coincided more closely than did those of Alexander and Stein. The Czar was emotionally Francophile; Metternich, far more calculating, strove to preserve at least a minimum of French power. In 1813, therefore, Stein's views had to take a back seat while Austria was being wooed away from France, and again while Metternich, backed by his emperor, was settling German affairs in a manner most disappointing to Stein, who received no backing from any organized government even though he was now the Czar's civil plenipotentiary.

As 1813 drew to a close, Stein moved his headquarters to Frankfurt. Once more the question of peace or war came to the fore. Were the allied armies to cross the Rhine, or were they to be satisfied with their success? Again Stein has been credited with helping to tip the balance in favor of a pursuit on the west bank.35 But by his own admission36 the continuation of the war was favored by such influential people as Czartoryski and Grand Duchess Catherine Pavlovna, who had Alexander's ear to at least an equal extent.37 There were also other effective exponents of this point of view. They included Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August von Gneisenau. The marriage ties between the houses of Bonaparte and Hapsburg, moreover, were quite sufficient in themselves to decide Alexander in favor of pursuing Napoleon to his ultimate destruction.

After the die had been cast, and Blücher had made the crossing at Kaub, a discussion of Stein's influence on the Czar becomes academic. This is what he himself wrote about his position during the Congress of Vienna:

...I had influence without authority, influence on very imperfect, human beings, who were to be used as tools for the attainment of high purposes. Alexander lacked depth and the ability to concentrate. Hardenberg suffered from apathy and the frigidity of age. Nesselrode was vulgar, weakminded and dependent on Metternich. The frivolity of all was the reason that no great, noble, and salutary idea...could be brought into being.38

At one point the Russian emperor's cordiality toward Eugène Beauharnais so upset Stein that rumors were rife of a complete break between him and his former master.39 From Vienna Stein went into permanent retirement. He left not a single statement that would identify him as a major policy-maker in 1812. He never claimed any such position. His contemporaries, even the ebullient Ernst Arndt, never credited him with the influence necessary to determine the historic decision that prepared Napoleon's downfall. To be sure, the evolution of Alexander from ally of Napoleon to crusading liberator of Europe cannot be traced with precision. But the metamorphosis came at a time when he seems to have been out of touch with Stein. When the two met again Alexander had already made up his mind. Stein, a successful administrator, was to play an important part in implementing the Czar's decision, but once Russia had been cleared of the enemy, he even ceased to be the Czar's sole consultant on German affairs. He played a limited role for a short time. The evidence allows no other conclusion.

35 Lehmann, III, 337-38.
36 Botzenhart, IV, 272.
38 Botzenhart, V, 219.