

Henry VIII's Early Foreign Policy, 1509-29

The common view of Henry VIII's and Cardinal Wolsey's foreign policy is that it was a failure. What are the main components of this view? Firstly, that Henry VIII failed to achieve his primary goal, which was to recover the French empire which had been conquered by Henry V. Secondly, that this aim was unrealistic: Henry's high hopes were naive, given that his resources were tiny compared with those of France. Thirdly, that his foreign policy was often incoherent, thus allowing more wily operators, such as King Ferdinand of Aragon and the Emperor Maximilian, to manipulate him. In short, foreign policy under Henry and Wolsey was unaccomplished, anachronistic, naive and aimless.

The Traditional View

Henry VIII's campaigns achieved few concrete gains and often seem to have been conducted for this allies' benefit rather than his own. His campaign in Aquitaine in south-western France in 1512 collapsed because his army contracted dysentery, got drunk and mutinied. He only succeeded in capturing the towns of Therouanne and Tournai in northern France in 1513, and these were soft targets. Neither of these campaigns directly served English interests. Ferdinand of Aragon persuaded Henry to campaign in Aquitaine so that he could recapture Navarre from the French (which he did, in spite of the dismal performance of English troops). Therouanne was a French fortress which threatened Maximilian's Burgundian territories, whilst Tournai was a French enclave in Burgundy. Further, Ferdinand and Maximilian signalled their gratitude to Henry by signing separate treaties with France, which left England to carry the fight against France by herself!

This pattern was repeated later in the 1523-25 campaign which saw Henry VIII allied with the Emperor Charles V against Francis I. Charles V proved that he was the successor to Ferdinand and Maximilian in more ways than their thrones: he was just as manipulative, self-interested and unreliable as they had been. For example, rather than capture Boulogne, which had always been the most realistic and useful target of English foreign policy as it would have strengthened England's hold on the Calais Pale, Henry decided to conduct his campaign against Paris, which served Charles V's interests. In fact, Henry's army came within reach of Paris and yet was forced to turn back because of Charles's failures elsewhere. Charles V was unhelpful in other ways too: he would not release his troops to help Henry, he rejected Henry's plans to dismember France following Charles's great victory over Francis I at Pavia in 1525, and he also refused to honour his treaty promise to marry Henry's daughter Mary (on which Henry was pinning his hopes for a solution to his concerns over the succession). It seems that Henry was a manipulable monarch – and a spendthrift.

The costs of Henry VIII's wars were extremely high. Henry spent £960,000 in 1511-13 and £430,000 in 1523-5 on warfare. In other words, he spent £1.4 million fighting wars between 1511 and 1525 – while his ordinary income was about £110,000 a year – and with little to show for it. It seems that he was trying to match the ambitions of wealthier monarchs such as Francis I and Charles V, whose annual incomes totalled £350,000 and £560,000 respectively. The relative expense of these wars becomes clearer still when one realises that Henry wasted the wealth which his father, Henry VII, had painstakingly saved. The campaigns of 1511-14 were, according to Richard Hoyle, largely funded from the wealth which Henry VII bequeathed to his son.

Of course, warfare amounted to extraordinary expenditure and was normally mostly financed from extraordinary revenue, in other words by taxes voted by parliament and by loans (which would have to be paid back out of ordinary revenue). Wolsey aimed to meet the entire costs of war from the lay and clerical purse, for which reason he had improved the system of assessing individuals for taxation purposes with the Tudor subsidy (introduced in 1513). This was a radical departure from previous practices and explains many of the difficulties which Wolsey's financial policies created, not the least because the impact of these was relatively high: England's tax base was small because its population was small (2.5 million compared with France's 14 million). Thus the heavy parliamentary taxation in 1523-4 and the forced loans of 1522 and 1523 amounted to an unprecedented assault upon the domestic, private purse and were extremely unpopular with parliament and taxpayers alike. When Wolsey tried in 1525 to raise even more money, this time through the Amicable Grant (which was effectively a

non-parliamentary tax), public patience snapped. In Kent and Norfolk reactions ranged from reluctance to outright refusal, and a full-scale revolt erupted in Suffolk when 10,000 men converged on Lavenham. The results of this were far-reaching: the Amicable Grant was dropped in a humiliating stand-down, Wolsey's attempts to bypass parliament further ruined his relations with this key body, Henry's wish to attack France had to be shelved (the Treaty of the More, 1525) and his confidence in Wolsey was shaken.

So, the costs of Henry's wars were indeed considerable: they drained his private resources and those of his subjects, and in the case of the latter, at significant political costs. For all Wolsey's efforts, it should have been clear that England could not compete with France, even with the support of Charles V.

A Reappraisal

Henry VIII was indeed, unlike his father, a warlike monarch, seeking gloire and prestige and pursuing his dynastic rights, just like any other Renaissance prince. However, it would be wrong to argue that Henry was obsessed with warfare for its own sake, even though the cult of chivalry continued to make war appealing to contemporary monarchs. For example, as important as Henry VIII's claim to France was in justifying his cherished objective of occupying French territory, it also served a more practical purpose as a lever to extract concessions from the French. As Steven Gunn has pointed out, Henry was very flexible regarding his claim to the French throne and, in this period at least, tended to use it as a negotiating device. In 1527, for instance, he agreed to forego further warfare in return for French help in securing the annulment of his marriage. Similarly, the capture of Therouanne and Tournai was anything but a reflection of Henry's vainglorious and naive military ambitions, as these were regarded as bargaining tools and not permanent.

The traditional view also fails to take account of the flexibility of Wolsey's policies. He pursued England's interests through war but also through peace. A good example of this is furnished by the Peace of London of 1518, Wolsey's most significant single achievement in foreign policy. This was not merely a means by which to win prestige for Henry and himself; it was also an attempt to avoid the threat of diplomatic isolation which resulted from the series of treaties which the victorious Francis I signed with Europe's powers after his momentous victory over the 'invincible' Swiss at Marignano in 1515. In order to avoid isolation, with its attendant dangers, Wolsey found a new route into Europe by hijacking Pope Leo X's plans for a universal peace. This, combined with the restoration of one of England's bargaining counters, Tournai, led to Anglo-French amity. However, Wolsey's diplomatic genius saw even greater opportunities and he was able to persuade the Emperor Maximilian, as well as Spain, Scotland, Venice and a host of others, including Leo X himself, to agree to a non-aggression pact under the aegis of Henry VIII. For a brief while, Henry VIII was the arbiter of Europe and London was its foremost capital.

The outcome of the imperial elections in 1519 further demonstrated just how precarious and subject to change the maintenance of English interests was. With his election, Charles V combined his power as Holy Roman Emperor with his rulership of Spain and Burgundy. His dynastic rivalry with Francis I was naturally enhanced, as they were now the only two key players on the continent. What this meant was that Wolsey's diplomatic opportunities were severely constrained by a choice between Charles V or Francis I.

Of course, in some ways the election of Charles of Habsburg strengthened England's bargaining position as it created a situation where both rivals wanted England as an ally (and this view has formed the basis of much of the historiography of Wolsey's foreign policy). This seems to be the explanation for the double-game Wolsey was playing with Francis I and Charles V in 1520-2, following the breakdown of the Peace of London. Wolsey hoped to use the enmity between Charles V and Francis I to secure the best diplomatic deal for England from one or other of them in return for English support. Hence, it has generally been argued, Wolsey used the meeting between Francis I and Henry VIII and the nobility of France and England at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and the Calais Conference, whilst also negotiating with Charles V at Bruges for this purpose.

Yet, in reality, Wolsey's scope for action was far more limited than circumstances suggest because English interests were closely tied to those of Charles V. This was partly because Henry was married to Catherine of Aragon but principally because England's economy was so reliant upon the Flanders cloth market. Where Henry VII had been able to resort to economic warfare against Burgundy, this avenue was closed to Henry VIII, due to

the fact that the profitability of English cloth was dependent on the rising economic strength of Flanders. In other words, as much as Wolsey might have tried to play off Francis I and Charles V in his search for the best deal for Henry VIII, he probably never intended before 1527, the year in which Charles V's unpaid army sacked Rome, to ally with France. Instead Wolsey's objective at the Calais Conference and at the Field of the Cloth of Gold was to put pressure on Charles V, in order that he would provide England with a better deal in a treaty to which Wolsey was already necessarily committed (this was signed in 1521 following negotiations in Bruges, negotiations which were kept secret from the French). So, Wolsey was playing a double game, but only ever with the intention of putting pressure on Charles V.

The Turning Point

One reason why 1525 is such a significant date, marking the start of a major *renversement des alliances*, was that Charles V failed to fulfil his part of the bargain by being a useful ally – in this instance, by supporting Henry's search for an annulment from Pope Clement VII to his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Without this annulment Henry could not remarry, and therefore could not have a son by whom to secure the succession. Henry's frustration over Charles V's utter obduracy in this matter led him to turn his back on the Habsburg alliance. Instead, after 1526, Wolsey hoped to use French ambitions to destroy Habsburg power in Italy and either break Charles V's power over the pope or, at the very least, to cajole the Emperor into negotiations. This is partly why Henry VIII became sponsor of the anti-Habsburg League of Cognac after 1526, becoming nominal Head of the League though without committing resources to its operations – resources which Henry could ill afford at this time. Perhaps also, though, England remained aloof from military actions because Wolsey was still trying to keep his options open, thereby to secure the best bargaining position for England.

Yet if Wolsey wanted to avoid a definite anti-Habsburg stance, he clearly failed. For a start, relations with France became more binding after the sack of Rome in 1527 by a mutinous Imperialist army which obliged Pope Clement VII 'to live and die a Habsburg'. Since this made a papal solution to Henry VIII's succession problems even less likely, Wolsey was obliged to commit England to an alliance to avoid the sort of isolation which might lead Charles V and Francis I to settle their differences at the expense of England. In January 1528 a reluctant Henry found himself at war with Charles V with the only accessible Habsburg target being England's trading partner, Burgundy. Since Wolsey wanted to avoid military action he determined on a trade embargo as the means to force Charles into negotiations, following the example of Henry VII who had used the same methods to win concessions from Maximilian and Philip the Fair. However, by the 1520s, England was much more dependent upon the Flanders cloth markets than it had been in the late fifteenth and very early sixteenth centuries. The combination of the third worst harvest of the sixteenth century in 1527, with widespread unemployment resulting from the cessation of the cloth trade, led to widespread trouble in the south-west, the south-east and East Anglia between March and May. The embargo was ended and Wolsey and Henry were forced into another humiliating climb-down. However, the upheaval proved what Wolsey had appreciated all along: that England could not afford to turn her back on the Habsburgs.

Conclusion

English foreign policy from 1509 to 1529 was not short-sighted, anachronistic or narrowly focused on war. Admittedly it was expensive and placed very serious strain upon limited resources, but this was an age of wars and wars were expensive. Moreover no contemporary monarch weighted up military gains against an artificial measure of financial expenditure, as the dismal legacy of incipient financial crises which Francis I, Henry II, Charles V and Philip II variously bequeathed underlines. Given the enmity between Charles V and Francis I, which the former's victory in the imperial elections compounded, it would, anyway, have been difficult to have formulated the kind of defensive neutrality policy which Henry VII had conducted, the success of which has tended to provide an unhelpful context for the study of foreign policy in this period because his successor had not the same scope for manoeuvre. Indeed, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the limitations imposed during 1509-29, far from being a costly failure, English foreign policy during this period developed as a flexible response to a changing European context and achieved relative success.

Further Reading:

- G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (London, 1977)
- Steven Gunn, 'The French Wars of Henry VIII' (in J. Black ed, *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe*, Edinburgh, 1987)
- Steven Gunn. 'Wolsey's Foreign Policy and the Domestic Crisis of 1527-8' in S.J. Gunn, and R.G. Lindley eds, *Cardinal Wolsey – Church, State and Art*, Cambridge, 1991
- John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1990)
- Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal* (London, 1990)
- David Potter, 'Foreign Policy' (in D. MacCulloch ed, *The Reign of Henry VIII*, London 1995 - see also the valuable articles by John Guy on Wolsey and Richard Hoyle on the impact of war on the royal finances)

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