

**Bernard de Montferrand, Vergennes. La gloire de Louis XVI, Paris (Tallandier) 2017, 448 p., 3 cartes, ISBN 979-10-210-0691-1, EUR 24,90.**

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**Jeremy Black, Exeter**

Of all the foreign ministers of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French Ancien Régime, it is Vergennes who has attracted most attention. Generally held to be a man of ability, he can also be presented in a number of ways: as a moderniser and a conservative figure, and as an adroit master of international relations, or as a failure, notably in being unable to devise an effective response to the rise of Russian assertiveness. The war with Britain in 1778–1783 can be presented as an appropriate response to the maritime situation or as an enervating distraction from other tasks. Vergennes' belief in a politics of honesty, restraint and legality, and his concern to act as the defender of the interests of the second- and third-rank powers, can be presented as naïve. Certainly, Vergennes found the situation in the 1770s disturbing. He was concerned about Russian expansion, personally so as most of his diplomatic career had been spent in Constantinople and Stockholm, and he was anxious to avoid a repetition of the Seven Years' War. To Vergennes, France's defeat then demonstrated the danger of engaging simultaneously in maritime and European conflicts. It also led him to emphasize the value of the Family Compact with Spain, which he saw as a deterrent to British envy of French colonial development in the West Indies and to British aggression. Moreover, the First Partition of Poland to Vergennes was both the politics of thuggery and a challenge to the pre-eminent position France should enjoy. The ambitions of Joseph II also worried Vergennes, although he did not want to let Austria return to her former alliance with Britain. Vergennes saw better relations with Prussia as a way to block Joseph's expansionist schemes, but he did not want to let Frederick the Great dictate French policy.

In the event, Vergennes was fortunate that his death, on 13 February 1787, ensured that he did not preside over the collapse of French policy in the Balkans and the Low Countries, nor over that of France's alliance system. For example, Vergennes undermined his policy of persuading the Turks to avoid war by a trade treaty with Russia, the news of which was greeted in Constantinople with anger and dismay. The internal coherence of his diplomatic strategy, the desire to keep the Turks calm while at the same time to improve relations with Russia (and perhaps also restrain her), was destroyed by the interaction of its own contradictions, and by events in Eastern Europe. In a similar fashion, France's policy in the Dutch crisis was to collapse.

There was, in short, a degree of unreality in Vergennes' reading of the international system and specifically of the assumptions and policies of other powers. This is not the theme of Bernard de Montferrand's largely eulogistic account of the minister, one in which for example he underestimates the scale of the Dutch disaster. It is of interest, because it is the work of a distinguished French diplomat, but there is neither the necessary depth of archival research nor the appropriate reading of the complexities of French policies, let alone those of other states. The sources used are far too limited for France alone, let alone those of



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other states. Some of the »Correspondance politique« has been used, notably for Franco-British relations and the American war; but none of the »Mémoires et documents«. The collections in the BN have not been considered even though they include relevant material, including the Vergennes-Bertin correspondence. And so on. Ultimately, the book, while gracefully written, is simply too thin.



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