

The Congress of Vienna – the turbulence and legacy of Great Power diplomacy

Nicolas J Lipscombe

After over twenty years of warfare, fighting French revolutionary armies and Napoleon's *Grande Armée*, the very fabric of European political and social cohesion had been torn asunder. In 1812 Napoleon's defeat in Russia unexpectedly thrust the task of constructing a new international order on the four victorious major powers in Europe. The result was a lengthy, often acrimonious but hugely flamboyant gathering in the Austrian capital in what was termed the Congress of Vienna. Yet the Congress of Vienna was not a congress in the formal sense; it was a blanket term for a series of meetings that started in 1812 and ended some ten years later.

Europe was rescued from seeming chaos. Yet historiography is diametrically split on the achievements of the makers of the 1815 settlement. On the one hand the process ignored liberalism and nationalism and, in the words of Harold Nicholson they were 'mere hucksters in the diplomatic market, bartering the happiness of millions with a scented simile'. While on the other hand, particularly when juxtaposed against the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, what the architects achieved was nothing short of miraculous, preventing a general European conflagration for nearly a century, and establishing the Congress System, which served as the precursor to the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations.

Background

On 20 April 1814, outside the Fontainebleau Chateau, Napoleon bid a tearful farewell to the brave companions of his elite *grogards* before being escorted to his new kingdom on the Isle of Elba. Even before his departure the old Bourbon regime had been restored in Tuileries Palace, France had turned full circle, and the allies' thoughts turned to the negotiation of a peace settlement. The idea of a universal confederation of European states to guarantee peace was not a new idea. Abbé de Saint-Pierre proposed it following the carnage of the Spanish Wars of Succession at the start of the eighteenth-century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau reignited the notion in the middle of the century, when he became custodian of Saint-Pierre's papers and in 1784 the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, concluded on the eve of the French Revolution that the destructiveness of wars would lead to the establishment of a universal federation to guarantee peace.¹ Then, following the French Revolutionary Wars Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski (advisor to the young and recently anointed Tsar Alexander of Russia) proposed plans for European reconstruction to contain the French revolutionary threat. In November 1804 these ideas came to the attention of the British Prime Minister, William Pitt.

Although Pitt was sceptical about the detail of Czartoryski's notions he embraced the concept and penned three prerequisites for any subsequent peace with France. Firstly, that France should be stripped of her

¹ Jarrett, *Congress and its Legacy* pp. 36-7.

conquests and reduced to her pre-Revolutionary borders; secondly, that the recovered territory should be safeguarded against future French aggression; and finally, and most significantly, ‘to form at the restoration of peace, a general agreement and Guarantee for the mutual protection and security of different Powers, and for re-establishing a general system of public law in Europe’.² Nothing came of it at the time but Pitt’s plan was to become Viscount Castlereagh’s (Britain’s foreign secretary and initial representative at Vienna) policy blueprint in 1814. It was so successful that he was able to lay the plan before the House of Commons the following year, as Pitt’s Plan, providing justificative gravitas to his proposed Vienna settlement.³

In September 1814, some months after Napoleon’s abdication, crowned heads, ministers, ambassadors and dignitaries descended on the Hapsburg capital to discuss and negotiate the reconstruction and stability of Europe. The *Acte final du Congrès de Vienne* was signed on 9 June 1815, nine days before the decisive Battle of Waterloo. But the Congress of Vienna was not a congress in the formal sense, it was a process that had started in the summer of 1812, with negotiations for a Sixth Coalition against Napoleon, and which effectively ended in September 1822, following a meeting at Verona. The negotiations that took place in Vienna between 1814 and 1815 are remembered more for their flamboyance and brinkmanship than their substance. Masked balls, majestic banquets and medieval jousts lit up the banks of the Danube. Women, who had woven a strong thread through the Napoleonic Wars, were equally important in the process of peacemaking that followed. ‘Never before – or after – have a group of statesmen and politicians assembled solely and exclusively to deal with matters of a commonweal interest, laboured so extensively and decisively under the influence of women...’.⁴

There were representatives from over 200 states and polities but only five nations held sway. Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia and France representing the five great powers – the same monarchs and ministers who had directed the final campaigns against Napoleon, restored the Bourbons, ratified the Treaty of Paris and summoned the Congress. They included Metternich for Austria, Castlereagh for Britain, Tsar Alexander for Russia, Hardenberg for Prussia and Talleyrand for France. Nevertheless, any hopes of a simple and quick solution were quickly dispelled as the architects of peace soon discovered that waging peace was as complex as conducting war. Zamoyski fittingly suggests that the course of negotiation at Vienna was like a game of poker. The actions and reactions of the key players are only comprehensible if one can see the cards each player holds and how he plays them. ‘The reason it nearly came to war several times during the Congress of Vienna was not that Prussia was being gratuitously aggressive, Russia perverse, or Austria devious, but that each was in dread of being outmanoeuvred by the others’.⁵

² Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace* pp. 17-18 citing Webster.

³ Kissinger, *World Restored* p. 40.

⁴ Spiel, *Eyewitness Account* from Sluga. G., *Women at the Congress of Vienna*.

⁵ Zamoyski, *op. cit.* p. xv.

Britain alone had no territorial claims and had, for the most part, achieved her strategic aims, namely maritime rights and a free Holland, at the Peace of Paris in May 1814. As such, Hardenberg saw Britain's presence at the Congress as a thorn in the side of progress. The two powers seeking territorial enhancement were Russia and Prussia. The former wanted to absorb a resurrected Kingdom of Poland within the framework of the Russian Empire. While Prussia wanted to create a homogeneous Prussian state by way of a forerunner to a Confederation of sovereign German states as a vehicle to weaken the authority of some of the larger German middle states (Saxony and Mainz) and to establish Prussian control over Northern Germany. Austria and Britain were in full and unified opposition to Russia's subjugation of Poland but split over the business of Prussian acquisition of Saxony. For Britain saw a strong Prussia as a buffer to contain France, while Austria viewed Prussian hegemony of the German Confederation (formerly the Holy Roman Empire under Hapsburg domination) as a clear threat to the balance of power within central Europe and, *ipso facto*, her very survival. Despite these crucial differences, Castlereagh and Metternich drove the process at Vienna. For Britain it is not unreasonable to state that Continental stability was its only Continental interest, for Austria, that stability was the cornerstone of her survival.

After months of intrigue and acrimonious bilateral and multilateral negotiation, a final agreement on the reconstruction of central Europe was reached on 6 February 1815. The momentum towards a final settlement was a testimony to the perseverance of Castlereagh and Metternich, but it was also only made possible by the change in heart and subsequent compliance of the Russian Tsar. Russia annexed most of the Duchy of Warsaw (the old French enclave in eastern Europe) while Prussia received part of Saxony and a large arc of territory across Northern Germany and the Rhineland. The latter provided the barrier against France that Britain had sought, but Prussia's territories remained dispersed, much to the huge disappointment of the Prussian King Friederich Wilhelm III. Nevertheless, not even the escape of Napoleon from Elba, the start of a new war lasting One Hundred Days and the establishment of a Seventh Coalition, could divert the Congress from its aims and progressive agenda. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, his second abdication and the second restoration of the Bourbons, a new set of peace treaties was made. But a peace settlement as generous as the first Treaty of Paris was out of the question. Under the Second Treaty of Paris, signed on 20 November 1815, France was to pay the costs of the war, a 700-million-franc indemnity, the costs of erecting barrier fortresses in the Netherlands and was to endure an army of occupation for a number of years. Despite this, the revised terms were not based on retribution but on political and capitalist expediency.

The Final Act had restored and safeguarded the balance of power and was built on the principle that the great powers, into which France took her place in due course, took common responsibility for peace and stability in Europe. The Act did, however, lack the apparatus by which the great powers were to convene to discuss matters of common interest in order to maintain that peace. Signed on the same day as the Second Paris Treaty was a fresh treaty close to Castlereagh's heart, and one which was to resolve the shortcomings of the Final Act. The Quadruple Alliance bound the four great powers to act jointly in the

preservation of the arrangements they had made, expressly to prevent any member of the Bonaparte family ever coming to power in France again.⁶ The powers made a pact to each deploy 60,000 men into the field (to supplement the army of occupation) to counter such a threat. They also agreed to hold periodic meetings to review the situation and instigate further measures to preserve the peace. The conference or congress system was established, therefore, as an afterthought. Throughout the nineteenth-century the system had various names; the European System, the Confederacy, the Great Alliance but by the end of the century historians had, in the main, settled on the Concert of Europe.⁷ This term has not stood the test of time, contemporary twentieth century historians have adopted the terms, the Conference System, the Vienna Settlement and the Congress System.⁸ This is curious and, in part, explains why this period of history is so misunderstood and misrepresented.

A month before the Second Treaty of Paris and the Quadruple Alliance, Tsar Alexander had proposed another *system* known as the Holy Alliance. Castlereagh dismissed the concept, and *ipso facto* the requirement, of such an agreement as ‘a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense’. He nevertheless undersigned the document (on behalf of the British government) realising its importance to the subsequent European order. By signing the Alliance, The Tsar of Russia, Emperor of Austria and King of Prussia were placing their respective, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant faiths on an equal footing. A Christian Europe heralded a secular era of international relations and unequivocally excluded the Muslim Sultan and the Ottoman Empire, *neatly* excluding the so-called ‘sick man of Europe’, towards which Russia retained territorial ambitions.⁹

The Second Treaty of Paris stipulated that the army of occupation under the Duke of Wellington would remain in northern France for a period of five years. However, Article V provided an option of early termination and in view of the destabilising influence of this army on Louis XVIII it was in the allies’ and France’s interest to trigger that clause. That proposal triggered the first congress of great powers since 1815. Castlereagh, however, wanted the meeting to be called under Article VI of the Quadruple Alliance, thereby enabling the powers to discuss other topics of ‘mutual concern’. His request arrived after general consensus had been achieved based on the initial proposal, which, at least, eliminated the tricky issue of excluding lesser states.¹⁰ The Congress met at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in late September 1818 and something akin to the joyful atmosphere of Vienna emerged. The delegates quickly dispensed with the issue of the occupying army and then moved on to the pricklier problem of the future relationship with France. As the Quadruple Alliance was essentially to guard against France, was it not inappropriate to admit her? In the end, largely through Castlereagh’s endeavours, France was included and the Congress

⁶ Ibid, p. 529.

⁷ Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe* p. 4.

⁸ I have used the term ‘Vienna settlement’ to encompass what was agreed in the *Acte final* and the term ‘Congress System’ to refer to the formalised cooperation between the Great Powers that followed.

⁹ Ghervas, *What was the Congress of Vienna?*

¹⁰ Jarrett, *op. cit.* p. 181.

System became enshrined in European polity. It had not been easy, for the Russian Tsar wanted a more intrusive *Alliance Solidaire*, doctrinally facilitating interference in domestic upheaval. Both Castlereagh and Metternich opposed the idea vehemently; the concept of states being able to interfere in the domestic issues of other states under an umbrella of liberty and tranquillity superimposed on the collective system of international security was entirely unacceptable.¹¹

Many other minor issues were considered at Aix: Spain's American colonies, the Treaty of Kiel (against Sweden), the threat posed by Barbary pirates, the slave trade, the German Jews and the imprisonment of Bonaparte on St Helena. The Congress appeared to be, and arguably was, an undoubted success, but it marked a watershed. European statesmen now shifted from dealing with post-Napoleonic France to combating the growing threat of social revolution. In fact, the Congress at Aix-la-Chapelle disclosed the ideological rift between the democratic and autocratic powers and highlighted the differences between the great powers and lesser states. To all intents and purposes, it marked the beginning of the end.¹² Subsequent conferences in Carlsbad in 1819, Troppau in 1820, Laibach (Ljubljana) in 1822 and finally, Verona in 1822 widened the gap and effectively nailed the lid on the Congress System.¹³ In reality, an alliance based upon the maintenance of the existing order could not preserve peace in a Europe in which interests and ambitions, both national and international, internal and external, were in a state of constant flux.¹⁴ The post Napoleonic peace settlement had shown considerable leniency towards the vanquished power but it paid little or no regard to the lesser states and saw the rise in nationalism and liberalism as momentary systems and potential threats from the revolutionary epoch. The notion that Vienna was about the restoration of legitimate rulers following many years of war and turbulence, does not stand up to the faintest of scrutiny. It was ignored in Saxony, the western German States, Poland, Norway, the Austrian Netherlands and Northern Italy. It is with no little irony that it was only France, who retook her place alongside the great powers after Aix-la-Chapelle, and which therefore fits the *restoration* mould with any degree of comfort.¹⁵

There is widespread agreement that the Congress System had withered on the vine within a few years of Vienna. In so doing it incurred the wrath of individuals like Friedrich von Gentz and Baron vom Stein. The former concluding that 'They [the great powers] only agreed, in fact, when it was a question of laying down the law to others'.¹⁶ Historians throughout the nineteenth century, by and large, shared a universal agreement with those sentiments; the reactionary nature of the 1815 settlement and the failure to grasp the *great* principles of liberalism and nationalism. On the eve of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, US President Woodrow Wilson was to state that "people and provinces would not be bandied around like

¹¹ Kissinger, *op. cit.* p. 226.

¹² Nicholson, *Study in Allied Unity* p. 263.

¹³ Britain and France participated as observers at Troppau and Laibach and Britain was largely isolated at Verona.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁵ Seaman, *Vienna to Versailles*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Zamoyski, *op. cit.* p. 551.

pawns in a game”, making direct reference to Vienna.¹⁷ It was nearer the middle of the twentieth century that historians began to see Vienna in a more favourable light and it is with no little irony that this revisionary viewpoint developed as the calamitous implications of the 1919 Treaty at Versailles became manifest. Juxtaposed against Versailles, Vienna was a triumph and in the words of Henry Kissinger “perhaps never again has European unity been so much a reality as between 1815 and 1821, so much so that it came to be forgotten with what forebodings the Vienna settlement had been greeted by Gentz, who predicted a major war within five years, and by Castlereagh himself, who thought that it would do well if it prevented another conflict for a decade. Not for a century was Europe to know a major war...”.¹⁸

Kissinger wrote this before he became Secretary of State to Richard Nixon, but he fervently believed that in international affairs, there is an inescapable duty to pursue order and stability over, if necessary, legitimacy and morality. He accepts that the international order that fell out of Vienna ‘had been founded on a misunderstanding and a misconception’. The former because Metternich went on to use the system to isolate his opponents and the latter because Castlereagh equated stability with a consciousness of reconciliation. Adam Zamoksyi, however, refutes the notion that Vienna *guaranteed* a hundred years of peace. He accepts that there was no general European war for four decades but points out, quite rightly, that there had not been one for three decades before the French Revolutionary Wars. He goes on to list the not inconsiderable number of lesser conflicts that raked Europe up to and including the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-71. On this basis Kissinger’s claim, which had been supported by other historians such as Paul Schroeder and Harold Nicholson, seems implausible. Furthermore, Zamoyski argues that Vienna was never completely consummated and quickly broke down and in no way established a new ‘legitimacy’.

It is an indisputable fact that peoples were not liberated in the way that, for example, Stein wanted the Germans to be ‘from the control of a motley hereditary of princelings’.¹⁹ However, to suggest that Germany, Italy, other lesser nations and principalities should have been given their independence in the wake of nearly a quarter of a century of warfare is perhaps naïve. Belgium, the first to receive their independence in 1830, could not have been granted that opportunity in 1815, as the Campaign of One Hundred Days aptly demonstrated. Germany was a particular problem but it is difficult to see how the great power statesmen could have achieved German unification without critically destabilising the delicate balance of power. It should be noted that the number of German states in the *Deutscher Bund* created by Vienna reduced the number of states to 39 (including Austria and Prussia) from the many hundreds that had existed under the Holy Roman Empire. Throughout the *Bund*, Austrian influence remained paramount, evoking the ire of the German nationalist movements but not, crucially in the immediate aftermath of Vienna, that of Prussia. Metternich considered German nationalism the most

¹⁷ Seaman, op. cit. 2.

¹⁸ Kissinger, op. cit. p. 315.

¹⁹ Seaman, op. cit. p.2

pressing danger to the balance of power in Europe and, even more importantly for Austria, the greatest threat to Austrian hegemony within the *Bund*. Austria was a polyglot state, in which Slavs and Magyars outnumbered the Germans, the collapse of the Confederation would, potentially, have disastrous consequences for Austria's survival. Viewed in that context, the Carlsbad Decrees, that banned nationalist fraternities, removed liberal university professors, and expanded the censorship of the press, are more comprehensible.

The settlement of Italy is a more difficult circle to square. The Vienna settlement had given Austria control of Lombardy-Venetia (and Illyria on the western part of the Balkan Peninsula), domination over the minor states to the south, control through a convention with Naples (Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) and an understanding, albeit a difficult one, with Sardinia/Piedmont. This gave Austria a role as guardian of the peninsula but not outright control. Was Italian *Risorgimento* mature enough to become reality in 1815? Lord William Bentinck, the British Government's man (and erstwhile loose-cannon) in the region, had proved in 1814, with attempts at uprising in Genoa, that it was not. Indeed, the very fact that *Risorgimento* was delayed (not just because of the Vienna settlement) until the middle of the century strengthens the case. The fact that the problem of the Papal States could only be resolved by conflict provides additional mitigation. As Lewis Seaman concluded, 'It is possible to argue that united Italy was brought to birth prematurely in 1870; there is all the more to be said for not expecting it to arise from the deliberations of 1815'.²⁰ Furthermore, northern Italy, like western Germany and the Low Countries, provided the necessary barrier against French aggression – this was, after all, where Napoleon I cut his teeth and where Napoleon III was to reassert French influence in Europe in the 1850s.²¹

Poland's geographic position and difficult history made it a particular problem for the peacemakers. Partitions of Poland had been carried out by Prussia in 1772, Russia in 1793, and Austria in 1795. In 1807, Napoleon temporarily recreated a Polish state as the satellite Duchy of Warsaw, after the successful Greater Poland Uprising of 1806 against Prussian rule. At the outset, Castlereagh was an avid defender of an independent Poland, while the Russian Tsar wanted to re-establish the Kingdom of Poland with a liberal constitution, connected to Russia through the monarch alone. Both defended their positions as contributing to European security. However, the disguise of Alexander's proposal was wafer thin. The rejection of the Russian proposal was swift and universal but it did not secure Polish independence, instead the country became used a bargaining chip to appease Prussia. Following Vienna, the eastern part was ruled by the Russian Tsar as Congress Poland, while the Prussians controlled the west and Austria ruled Galicia. Only Free City of Kraków, remained completely independent and allowed Polish culture to flourish. It solved the dilemma of Saxony and, as such, avoided a complete breakdown in negotiations between the Great Powers but, nevertheless, it remained a necessary evil. The Saxon question had become

²⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

²¹ It should also be noted that Austria had lost its stake in the Netherlands needed to be compensated.

a means to limit Russia's Polish ambitions and the Polish settlements had become a means to satisfy Prussia's aspirations towards Saxony.

Verdict – Success or Failure

The period certainly marked a watershed in the rights of people and nations, not because of the Vienna settlement but coincident to it. It was only right that the French were forced to abandon many of her social gains and glories of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period. The Danes were not traumatised by the loss of Norway. The Italians were not condemned to a repressed clandestine existence until their national unification in 1870. The Germans did not abandon the pursuit of their cause; a cause that had now been made possible, in time, by terms of the Vienna settlement. The Poles were an exception. Vienna had condemned them to an unnatural repression. It was a repression that echoed down the centuries (past and future) brought about by their geographic challenge, sitting at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe. 'The attainment of peace is not as easy as the desire for it', wrote Kissinger. He is one of the few historians who has written about the Congress of Vienna with practical experience of the difficulties of international statesmanship. The settlement in 1815 was never going to satisfy nations and peoples, that was never the purpose. The purpose was stability, and here it is worth paraphrasing Kissinger again:

'Stability, then, has commonly resulted not from a quest for peace but from a generally accepted legitimacy. "Legitimacy" as here used should not be confused with justice. It means no more than an international agreement about the nature of workable arrangements and about the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy. It implies the acceptance of the framework of international order by all the major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied that, like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy. A legitimate order does not make conflicts impossible, but limits their scope.'

The spirit of the Vienna settlement was more than conservative, it was regressive, winding the clocks back to the start of the French Revolutionary Wars. Reform, in any guise, was viewed with fear and suspicion; reform was revolutionary. The Vienna settlement was, above all, directed at preventing any new revolution rising in France. In 1815, that fear remained real. France was to remain the continued source of revolutionary disturbance; Paris was to erupt in 1830, 1848, 1851 and 1870. 'When Paris sneezes, Europe catches a cold' wrote Metternich. The unease was both tangible and apposite. The statesmen charged with establishing a lasting peace in 1815 were determined to contain the contagion and avoid further chaos and carnage by creating new methods of international cooperation and dialogue. Thus, the Congress System was also progressive, it was an audacious experiment. It failed for a number of reasons: it was underwritten with ambiguity and misunderstanding, it was dependent on the individual architects themselves, it did not take into account the subsequent (and in some cases rapid) economic, social and political changes and finally, it did not take sufficient account of nationalism and liberalism.

However, perhaps it failed because there was no Congress System at all. The Quadruple and Holy alliances were not systems *per se*, they were aspirations in the minds of the architects. A *system* needed more, much more, than mere aspiration. Ideas that were put forward to restrict the size of standing armies, for the creation of a European army and for a maritime league against the Barbary pirates, which would have individually or collectively, given greater substance to the so-called system, were all rejected out of hand.²² That was because Vienna was about peace and settlement in Europe, not the wider world and it was here that, Britain in particular, had much at stake. A balance of power in Europe was necessary to allow Britain to expand overseas.

Although the aspiration of international governance through dialogue was to fail in a relatively short period of time, that aspiration nevertheless set the climate of conservative Continental order and delineated the international arena into which the five Great Powers were to operate for much of the century. By the time of the Congress at Laibach, effectively marking Britain's withdrawal, the equilibrium had been established. Austria, Russia and Prussia had a bond of understanding that maintained the status quo and contained France. In the decade after Vienna conflicts were to break out in Greece, Spain and Italy which involved the intervention of four of the Great Powers, namely France, Britain, Austria and Russia. That these conflicts did not lead to general war is entirely due to that new Continental order. In other words, although the Congress System failed, the order lived on. It is a moot point as to whether it lasted nearly a century until the start of the First World War or whether it served as the precursor to the League of Nations and the United Nations that followed. Nevertheless, it was a bold experiment and the first genuine attempt to forge an international order, but the price of peace, as ever, was high. Lewis Seaman sums it up well, 'The Vienna settlement must not be regarded as having of itself prevented European war for a century. It is possible to say instead that it contained in none of its provisions the seeds of a future war between the great powers, and must thus be rated a better peace than either Utrecht or Versailles'.²³

Bibliography:

Ghervas, S., *What was the Congress of Vienna?* published in *History Today*, Volume 64 Issue 9 September 2014.

Holbraad, C., *The Concert of Europe, A study in German and British International Theory 1815-1914* (London, 1970).

Jarratt, M., *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy, War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (New York, 2016).

King, D., *Vienna 1814* (New York, 2008).

²² Schenk, *Aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars* p. 214.

²³ Seaman, *op. cit.* p.8.

Kissinger, H., *A World Restored, Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (London, 1957).

Nicolson, H., *The Congress of Vienna, A Study in Allied Unity 1812-1822* (London, 1948).

Seaman, L. C. B., *From Vienna to Versailles* (London, 1995).

Schenk, H. G., *The Aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, The Concert of Europe – An Experiment* (London, 1947).

Sluga, G., *Women at the Congress of Vienna* published in EUROZINE, January 2015.

Zamoyski, A., *Rites of Peace, The Fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna* (London, 2007).