
The Postwar Settlement: The Congress of Vienna (1814-1815)

The Congress of Vienna met in 1814 and 1815 to redraw the map of Europe after Napoleon, and provide some way of preserving the peace. While Europe was spared a general war through the remainder of the nineteenth century, the failure of the statesmen who shaped its future in 1815 to recognize the forces unleashed by the French Revolution, such as nationalism and liberalism, only postponed the ultimate confrontation between two views of the world: change and accommodation versus maintaining the status quo.

The “Big Four” Meet the Wily Fifth

The Vienna settlement was the work of representatives of the four nations that had done the most to defeat Napoleon: Austria, England Prussia, and Russia:

Klemens, Prince Metternich. Representing Austria, Metternich epitomized conservative views. He resisted change and was generally unfavorable to ideas of liberals and reformers because of the impact such forces would have on the multinational Habsburg Empire; but he was willing to recognize unavoidable changes from the previous years.

Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh. As England’s representative, Stewart saw his principal objective as achieving a balance of power on the Continent by surrounding France with larger and stronger states.

Karl von Hardenberg. As chancellor of Prussia. Hardenberg sought to recover Prussian territory lost to Napoleon in 1807 and gain additional territory in northern Germany (all of the rebel kingdom of Saxony).

Tsar Alexander I. Representing Russia, Alexander was a mercurial figure who vacillated between liberal and reactionary views. The one specific “nonnegotiable” goal he advanced was a “free” and “independent” Poland with himself as its king.

Joining the Big Four was **Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord**, who represented disgraced France, his fat king, and the sweet life before 1789. With a club foot, like that of the poet Lord Byron, he managed with great charm to betray every master from Louis XVI to Napoleon for gain and power. Napoleon once called him “a sack of crap in a silk stocking.” But he was as good a diplomat as Metternich. Though Talleyrand as foreign minister, was left out of early deliberations, he became a mediator when interests of

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Prussia and Russia clashed with those of England and Austria. He thereby brought France into the deliberating elite.

The “Dancing Congress”

This gathering of Europe’s princes and princelings was held amid much pageantry. Parties, balls, and extramarital dalliances were intended to generate favorable opinion and occupy the lesser delegates, since they had little of note to do.

Principles of Settlement

Legitimacy

“Legitimacy” meant returning to power most of the ruling families deposed by more than two decades of revolutionary warfare. The Bourbons were restored in France, Spain, and Naples; old dynasties to Holland Sardinia. Tuscany, and Modena; and the pope to his states. But Metternich allowed the 1803 reorganization of the now-defunct Holy Roman Empire to stand, even though his family was one of the many that thereby lost power and lands. He also recognized the new king of Sweden, a French general named Bernadotte.

Compensation

“Compensation” meant territorial rewards to states that had made sacrifices to defeat Napoleon. England received far-flung naval bases (Malta, Ceylon, and Cape of Good Hope). Austria recovered the Italian province of Lombardy and was awarded adjacent Venetia as well as Galicia (from Poland), and the Illyrian Provinces along the Adriatic. Russia was given most of Poland, with the tsar as king, as well as Finland and Bessarabia. Prussia was awarded the Rhineland three-fifths of Saxony and part of Poland. Sweden was given Norway. Talleyrand brokered the important Poland-Saxon trade-off.

Balance of Power

“Balance of power” meant arranging the map of Europe so that never again could one state, such as France, upset the international order and cause a general war.

Delegates achieved the encirclement of France through several measures:

- A new kingdom of Holland was created uniting Belgium (Austrian Netherlands) to the old United Provinces, now a much larger state north of France.
- Prussia received Rhenish lands bordering the eastern French frontier.

- Switzerland received a guarantee of perpetual neutrality.
- Austria received control over the Germanies through the new German Confederation (the Bund) of thirty-nine states, with Austria always president of the Diet of the Confederation
- Piedmont-Sardinia had its former territory restored, with the addition of Genoa.

Enforcement Provisions (Concert of Europe)

Arrangements to guarantee the enforcement of the status quo as defined by the Vienna settlement now included two provisions. The “Holy Alliance” of Czar Alexander of Russia, an idealistic and unpractical plan, existed only on paper: no one except Alexander took it seriously. The “Quadruple Alliance” of Austria, England, Prussia, and Russia provided for concerted action to stop any threat to the peace or balance of power.

England defined concerted action as the “Great Powers” meeting in “congress” to solve each problem as it arose, so that no state would act unilaterally and independently of the other great powers. France was always believed to be the possible “repeat offender” and next violator of the Vienna settlement.

Austria believed concerted action meant the great powers defending the status quo as established at Vienna against any change or threat to the system. Thus, liberal or nationalist agitation was unhealthy for the body politic.

Congress System

From 1815 to 1822, European international relations were controlled by meetings held by the great powers to defend the status quo: the Congresses of Aix-la-Chapelle (1818), Troppau (1820), Laibach (1821), and Verona (1822).

The principle of collective security required unanimity among members of the Quadruple Alliance. The history of the Congress System points to the ultimate failure of this key provision in light of the serious challenges to the status quo after 1815.

Evaluation

The Congress of Vienna has been criticized for ignoring the liberal and nationalist aspirations of many peoples. Hindsight suggests that statesmen at Vienna may have been more successful in stabilizing the international system than those charged with the same task in the twentieth century. Not until the unification of Germany (1870-1871) was the balance of power upset: not

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until World War I in 1914 did Europe have another general war. But hindsight also instructs us that the statesmen at Vienna underestimated the new nationalism generated by the French Revolution and did not understand the change that citizen armies and national wars had affected among people concerning political problems. In addition, the men at Vienna in 1815 underestimated the growing liberalism of the age and failed to see that an industrial revolution was beginning to create a new alignment of social classes, with new needs and issues.