

Restoration, Ideologies, and Upheavals 1815-1850

Until about 1815 the economic and political revolutions of the late 18th century evolved separately, with the Industrial Revolution in England having little impact on continental Europe, and the French Revolution having limited influence on the operation of the English government. As the factory system and capital growth progressed in England, the almost continual warfare on the Continent kept these changes from spreading. Meanwhile, the aristocracy kept firm control of the British Parliament, and they suppressed all forms of political radicalism at home. British troops eventually joined the forces that gathered against Napoleon's armies, reflecting their support of monarchical government, even if their king's powers were checked by Parliament. After peace returned in 1815, the situation changed, and economic and political developments tended to reinforce one another, as industrialization and political ideologies interacted to shape the course of European history for the rest of the 19th century.

The Congress of Vienna, 1814-1815

The eventual triumph of revolutionary economic and political forces was not readily apparent at the end of the Napoleonic wars. The coalition of nations that rose against Napoleon forced him to abdicate his crown in 1814, and after restoring the monarchy by naming Louis XVI's brother as the king of France, they assembled as a diplomatic congress at Vienna. There they began to squabble about what to do with Poland and Saxony, but they promptly buried their differences when Napoleon escaped his prison on the island of Elba and returned to France to rally a new army. In June, 1815, an allied army under the Duke of Wellington met Napoleon at Waterloo in Belgium, and routed him once and for all. After Napoleon's exile to St. Helena in the South Atlantic, the Congress of Vienna resumed its meetings with new resolve to settle the future of Europe.

A principal goal of those assembled was a restoration of monarchical power, and to do that, they redrew the map of Europe that had been so affected by Napoleon's conquests. France was given generous terms, partly to help the French public accept the restoration of the Bourbons to the throne, and partly as a result of the skillful diplomacy of Charles Talleyrand, the French representative at the Congress. Talleyrand's talents were apparent as he successfully argued that the restored French monarch could succeed only if

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France retained its great-power status and participated fully in the negotiations. Since France was a defeated power, Talleyrand's participation was highly unusual in a situation where the victors could have easily taken their spoils. As it turned out, France remained as one of the major European powers.

The map created at the Congress of Vienna balanced France's great-power status with the need to check further French aggression, which had threatened the European balance of power since the days of Louis XIV. Austria's chief negotiator was Foreign Minister Prince Klemens von Metternich, who worked closely with British Prime Minister Robert Castlereagh to ensure an agreement that would prevent further outbursts of revolutionary disturbance. Some important changes included:

Creation of the German Confederation – Based on Napoleon's Confederation of the Rhine, the new German Confederation consolidated 38 separate German states under one loosely-organized government. However, the Congress ignored the wishes of German nationalists for a strong unified Germany, since all the member-states remained virtually sovereign. Still, the Confederation became part of the ring of powers that surrounded France.

Consolidation of the Dutch Republic and the Austrian Netherlands – The new Kingdom of the Netherlands was created with the merger of the Dutch Republic and the Austrian Netherlands, forming a stronger state along the northern French border.

Prussian control of the Rhine – Almost all the German left bank of the Rhine River was ceded to Prussia, which was to be, in Castlereagh's words, a kind of "bridge" spanning central Europe, a powerful state that checked both France in the west and Russia in the east.

Austrian control of Italian states – The Austrian Habsburg family was given control of several northern Italian states, with the exception of the Papal States and Sardinia, the latter of which was enlarged by the addition of Genoa. These Italian lands were given to Austria not only to contain French power, but also to compensate for the loss of the Austrian Netherlands and Polish territory.

Russian and British gains – Most of Poland was awarded to Russia, compensating Prussia with most of Saxony, and Austria with Italian lands. Great Britain picked up more overseas possessions by annexing Malta, South Africa, part of Guiana and some other colonial territories.

The problem of maintaining the future peace received much attention at the Congress of Vienna. On the initiative of Tsar Alexander I of Russia, a Holy Alliance was forged among the rulers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria that bound them to conduct their governments according to Christian principles. They pledged to “remain united by the bonds of a true and indissoluble fraternity” in order “on all occasions and in all places to lend each other aid and assistance.” The British king was invited to join the Holy Alliance but declined to do so on the ground that he lacked the constitutional powers to fulfill its provisions. Except by the highly religious tsar of Russia, the Holy Alliance was not taken very seriously by the rulers and ministers of Europe whose visions of the future were shaped by a secular, practical approach to international politics.

All four great victorious powers – Austria, Russia, Prussia, and Great Britain took the Quadruple Alliance that they formed seriously, with the agreement that periodic congresses were to be called to discuss outstanding problems. The arrangement was called the Concert of Europe, and in a few years, France was invited to join, and the nations vowed to preserve peace and to take steps to maintain the status quo should it be threatened by revolutionary disturbances in any part of Europe.