

# The Congress of Vienna

## and The Origins of the Modern International Order

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Two years ago historians of Europe celebrated two remarkable anniversaries—the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War (August 1914) and the bicentenary of the Congress of Vienna, which began in September 1814 and lasted until June 1815. These anniversaries were especially timely because we are now witnessing a return to multipolarity in the international system, with all its consequent uncertainties. Ironically, our world may be becoming more like the one designed by the statesmen of 1814 than either the Cold War or the “unipolar moment” of the 1990s.

We live in an age of global challenges, and the Congress of Vienna constitutes a major episode in the history of international cooperation. From the perspective of both international-relations theory and diplomatic practice, several contemporary concerns stand out. The Congress of Vienna negotiated one of the most successful peace settlements in

history. How did they do it? The Congress statesmen were adept at developing new international institutions. Why did some of these endure and others fail? The Congress statesmen have a reputation for being reactionary opponents of change. How much of this reputation is deserved?

### The Challenge of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire

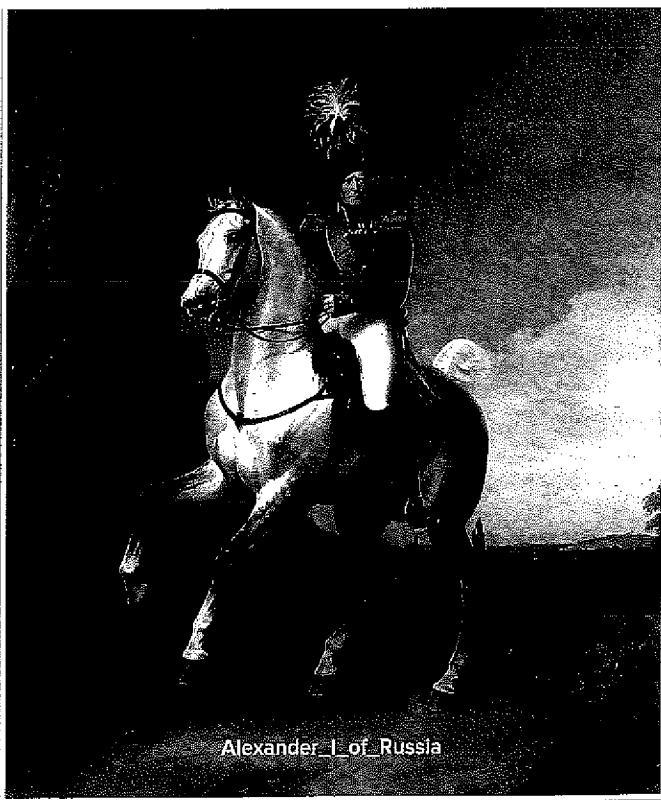
To answer these questions, we must first return to the conditions of the late eighteenth century. Europe then consisted of a mixture of empires, kingdoms, and smaller states, generally ruled by hereditary monarchs and privileged nobles. Most countries had an established church. The vast majority of Europeans were peasants, eking out their daily existence and never traveling far from their own village. Public opinion existed, but was far less important than today, especially in the realm of foreign affairs. Nationalism existed to some extent, but national feelings were generally

weaker and less exclusive than they later became. European elites were far more cosmopolitan. Methods of communication and transportation were rudimentary and national leaders rarely, if ever, met face to face. Military power rested on the size of a country’s infantry and cavalry, in turn based on its population. From Britain to Spain, each of the Western European powers also possessed overseas colonies. European traders sailed to the West African coast to purchase captives for enslavement; sugar, tobacco, furs and other products were imported from the Americas; and a steady flow of trade connected Europe and Asia.

In the summer of 1789, this eighteenth-century world was shaken to its foundations by the dramatic events of the French Revolution. Many welcomed this upheaval for its promises of personal liberty, representative government and greater social equality. However, the Revolution soon erupted in violence, much as Edmund Burke and other

detractors had predicted. By 1793, the French had executed their king and found themselves at war with most of Europe. They introduced mass conscription (the *levée en masse*), promoted officers based on merit rather than ancestry, and adopted new battlefield tactics. Surrounded by enemies on all sides and gripped with paranoia, France's Jacobin leaders inaugurated a bloody "Reign of Terror." Only after the prospects of ignominious defeat subsided did the domestic violence end and the French Convention turn against its own leaders. The Revolution thus devoured its own children.

In the aftermath, Napoleon Bonaparte, a brilliant soldier and strategist, rose to power. By 1797, Bonaparte had defeated Austrian forces in Italy, becoming a national hero. After a *coup d'état* in 1799, Napoleon made himself the dictator of France. In 1804, only ten years after the Terror had ended, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor of the French in Notre-Dame Cathedral. He went on to conquer much of Europe, altering historic borders as he went. Napoleon ended the Holy Roman Empire, attached the Netherlands and much of Italy directly to France, created the Confederation of the Rhine, took former Polish lands away from Prussia and Austria to create the Duchy of Warsaw, and placed his brother Joseph on the throne of Spain and his brother-in-law Joachim Murat on the throne of Naples.



Alexander I of Russia

On the positive side, he promulgated the French civil code, which ended serfdom and religious bigotry wherever his soldiers marched. But he also alienated local populations with his frequent requisitions, conscription, and trade restrictions. Napoleon made his greatest mistake in 1812 when he invaded Russia at the head of a vast army of half a million men. He successfully defeated the Russians at Borodino and advanced to Moscow, where he remained with his troops until the end of October, hoping to negotiate favorable terms with the Tsar. When Napoleon finally sounded the retreat, it was too late to avoid the decimation of his troops from a lack of provisions and the cold Russian winter.

Tsar Alexander I not only drove Napoleon out of Russia but also took the momentous step of carrying his military campaign into central Europe. The Russians were already allied with the British, and they signed a new treaty of alliance with the Prussians at Kalisz in February 1813. Austria, nominally the ally of France, wobbled on the sidelines. In June, the young Austrian Foreign Minister, Prince Klemens von Metternich, met with Napoleon at Dresden, where he failed to persuade the French Emperor to make meaningful concessions. In the fall of 1813, Austria then also joined the allied coalition. In October 1813, the allied powers inflicted a decisive defeat on Napoleon at

Leipzig in the "Battle of the Nations"—the largest battle fought in Europe prior to the First World War. Despite this thrashing, Napoleon resolutely refused to reduce his terms in the negotiations subsequently conducted at Chatillôn.

By April 1814, the allied armies had entered Paris and forced Napoleon to abdicate. In May, the allies signed a peace treaty with Louis XVIII, the restored French king. Unlike the Treaty of Versailles a century later, the Peace of Paris was generous in its treatment of the defeated power. The French kept their stolen

art works and were not asked to pay any reparations or indemnity; the borders of France were left where they had been in 1792. There was no allied occupation. The allied leaders did not want to erode the authority of the monarch they had just restored by imposing harsh terms.

### The Congress of Vienna

The Peace of Paris (May 1814) defined the borders of post-Napoleonic France but did not determine what to do with the rest of Napoleon's vast empire—those lands once ruled by Napoleon, his relatives and allies in Germany, Poland, Italy, and Switzerland. A public article of the new peace treaty invited all the states of Europe to send their plenipotentiaries to Vienna in September 1814 in order to participate in negotiations determining the future of these territories. The self-evident intent of the allied leaders was first to agree on the territorial reconstruction of Europe among themselves and then to have representatives from the rest of Europe rubber-stamp their decisions. But the allied leaders failed to reach an agreement during their summer meetings in Paris and London. Representatives of the lesser states began arriving in Vienna in September 1814, while the great powers had not yet settled matters among themselves. Because of this uncertainty, the official opening of the congress was repeatedly postponed. "The visible aim" of the four allied powers, Talleyrand reported to Louis XVIII, was to make themselves the "absolute masters of all the operations of the Congress." In the end, the Congress never met in plenary session as originally intended.

The chief stumbling block facing the statesmen was the so-called "Polish-Saxon" question. Once one of the largest states of Europe, Poland had been divided through a series of partitions towards the end of the eighteenth century. Tsar Alexander had promised his childhood friend—the Polish prince, Adam Jerzy Czartoryski—that one day he would restore Poland. Napoleon's Duchy of Warsaw furnished the materials for a

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reconstruction of the Polish state. However, the Tsar also had to answer to the Russian nobles and army. His novel solution was to propose a separate kingdom of Poland with himself as king. The Poles would be granted their own constitution and national assembly, separate from Russia. To compensate Prussia for the loss of its former Polish territories, the Tsar promised to award the Prussians the neighboring kingdom of Saxony, whose king had remained Napoleon's ally in the last stages of the war.

The Austrians and British were quite aghast at these proposals, which they saw as tantamount to the Russian acquisition of Poland. Prussia, they feared, would lose its defensible frontiers and become a weak dependent of Russia. The Tsar even taunted Castlereagh during the negotiations, declaring that there was nothing that the other allies could do to stop him, since the Russian army was already in occupation of Poland (akin to the Red Army's presence in Eastern Europe in 1945 and Putin's occupation of the Crimea today).

Austria and Britain tried to put on a brave front. At first they cooperated with Prussia, offering the Prussian minister all of Saxony if he would cooperate with them in opposing the Russian acquisition of Poland. But the King of Prussia felt indebted to the Tsar for Prussia's liberation and castigated his chief minister for resisting Russian plans. Metternich and Castlereagh then signed a secret alliance treaty with Talleyrand, the plenipotentiary from France. Talleyrand wrote jubilantly to Louis XVIII that he had dissolved the allied coalition and that France was "no longer isolated from Europe."

Could there have been a war between the victorious allies? In December 1814, many of the gossipmongers in Vienna thought so. Both Prussian and Austrian generals began planning bellicose troop movements, although this may have been mere saber-rattling. Some historians argue that the new treaty between Britain, Austria and France succeeded in coercing the Russians and Prussians, but this seems unlikely since its terms were kept secret.

In the end, Metternich and Castlereagh could do very little to stop

the Russian juggernaut. They appealed to what we might today call "soft power" and achieved some moderate success: the Tsar made a few concessions to keep the support of Europe and because of his own religious convictions, since he pictured himself as the "Savior" of Europe. Even so, the Russians kept most of Poland. The Prussians, on the other hand, obtained only two-fifths of Saxony. Russian support for their claims had weakened once Russia had secured Poland. The Prussians were forced to accept compensation in the Rhineland (to the west) instead of the rest of Saxony.

Once the Polish-Saxon question was settled, the other pieces of the puzzle fell quickly into place. The great powers at Vienna sanctioned the creation of a new organizational framework for the German states—there were 39 of them at the time—known as the German Confederation. This new body replaced the former Holy Roman Empire and was intended to provide the German states with a forum for cooperation as well as a means of common defense against France. Austria, whose rulers had traditionally served as Holy Roman Emperors, assumed the "presidency" of this new organization.

The Congress statesmen also redrew the map of Italy, agreed to overthrow Murat (Napoleon's brother-in-law) as King of Naples, endorsed recent territorial changes in Scandinavia, approved the Swiss Constitution, guaranteed Swiss neutrality, established a new international commission to regulate and protect the free navigation of the Rhine, sanctioned the creation of the independent kingdom of the Netherlands, and discussed the rights of German Jews and the future abolition of the slave trade. *They further established new rules for diplomatic precedence, based on alphabetical order, to avoid future disputes.*

While these negotiations were being conducted, the delegates—including the leading ministers of the great powers—attended one of the most lavish celebrations in history. Hundreds of representatives were on hand. With two emperors and five kings in attendance, social events included an outdoor banquet for war veterans<sup>4</sup> on the anniversary of the

battle at Leipzig, a jousting tournament in medieval dress, a lavish sleigh ride to the palace of Schönbrunn, a solemn church service for Louis XVI of France, a picnic to raise funds to liberate the captives of the Barbary pirates, countless costumed and masked balls, nightly soirées in leading salons, magnificent military parades, the appearance of famous chefs, the spread of new forms of popular dance, and plenty of romantic intrigue.

Although the great powers kept the most important decisions in their own hands, the delegates of the lesser states participated in committees drafting the constitution of the German Confederation, the Swiss Constitution, and other matters. They also exercised influence on the leading diplomats through the numerous social events.

The Vienna "Final Act" brought all of these decisions together into a single treaty rather than a series of separate, bilateral treaties, as had been customary up to that time. *The new treaty was a single instrument to which all the powers of Europe—both large and small—subscribed, laying a new foundation for the public law of Europe.* The allied leaders even discussed the possibility of a general guarantee of the treaty, although in the end they rejected this proposal.

## Factors behind the Duration of the Settlement

Was the settlement a success? *No major war occurred in Europe until the Crimean War forty years later, and no total war, such as the Napoleonic Wars, took place for an entire century.* For this reason, most scholars give the Congress statesmen high marks—especially when comparing their achievement to the results of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Historians have attributed its general success to a variety of factors:

1. After twenty-five years of war, there was a general concern to re-establish conditions of stability and legitimacy. The allied leaders wanted to secure the consent of Europe so that the new frontiers they established had some permanence.
2. The allied leaders had become personally familiar with one another during the final months of the war.

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They had shared the burden of fighting the French and had sat together in war councils at the allied camp. They could consider things from each other's perspective. They had experienced failure as well as success in the long struggle with Napoleon, further instilling a keen sense of pragmatism.

3. The allied leaders wanted to avoid a punitive peace. They sought to prevent any future sense of *revanchism* (or revisionism) by any of the great powers. Britain and Russia especially showed restraint in refusing to dismember France.
4. As the wars with France had shown, the greatest weaknesses in the system lay in the center of Europe—a broad “middle zone” extending from the German states in the north southwards to Italy. This was the vulnerable area that had been dominated or conquered by France. This was the pivotal area to be redistributed, simplified and

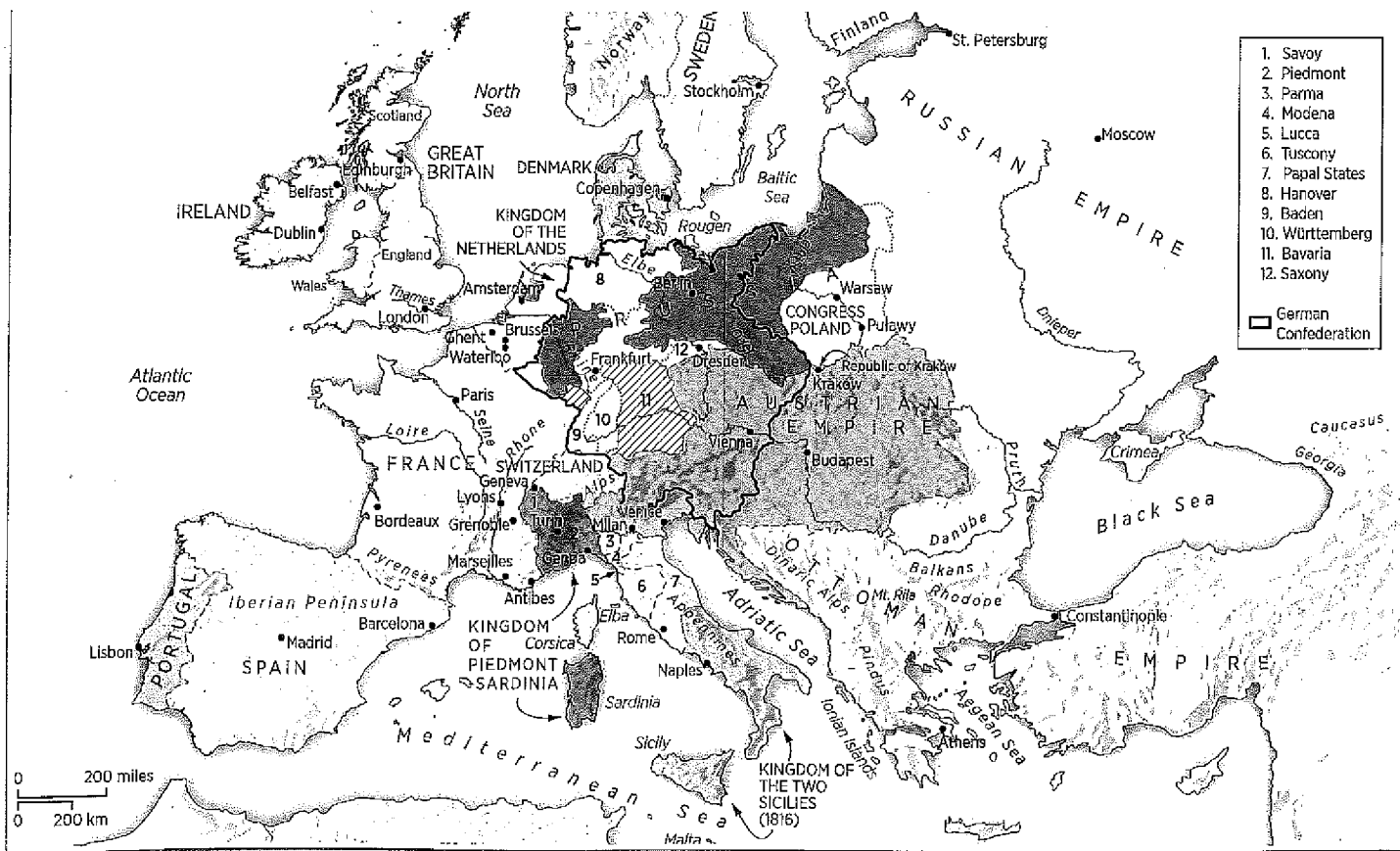
strengthened. The Allies mainly did this with a concern for the balance of power. Little attention was heeded to the desires of the local inhabitants. Nationalism was not totally ignored, as some historians once argued, but its influence was minimal. Buffer states were placed around France; Britain, Austria and France cooperated to oppose the further expansion of Russia.

5. The main territorial aims of the great powers were clear. Each was, in effect, awarded its own sphere of influence. Adopting a “realist” position, I would argue that most of the great powers were “satiated.” To the west, Britain gained the possession of several island outposts, the control of major sea lanes and a strong Netherlands. To the east, Russia expanded in the direction of Europe, keeping its recent acquisitions of Finland and Bessarabia and creating Poland as a new buffer state under Russian control. In the

center of Europe, Austria was given control of Italy and leadership of the new German Confederation. The basic requirements of all three of the largest allied powers were thus met. France was limited to her position at the end of the *ancien regime*. Prussia remained the weakest of the five great powers. It had great hopes of acquiring contiguous territory to restore its size but was largely disappointed at the Congress. Nevertheless, the Congress pushed Prussia decisively to the west.

6. The conclusion of the Vienna “Final Act” as a composite treaty encapsulating all these decisions increased the degree of international commitment to the new settlement. Historians Paul Schroeder and Matthias Schulz emphasize that *decisions taken at the Congress of Vienna established new international norms—a respect for treaties and the rule of law.*

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### The “Congress System” The First Attempt at Global Governance

In the middle of these celebrations, Napoleon escaped from his place of exile on Elba, landed in the South of France, marched northward, and reoccupied his former throne in Paris in late March 1815. Still assembled at Vienna, the allied leaders agreed to take the field against the restored French Emperor. English, Prussian and Dutch forces defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815, approximately a hundred days after his return to France.

The sudden reappearance of Napoleon sent shock waves across Europe. The allied leaders decided they had not gone far enough in 1814. The Prussians wanted to dismantle part of France, as did the British press. The Prussians even wanted to blow up the Jena Bridge in Paris (named after a French victory over the Prussians). But the Tsar, the Duke of Wellington, and Castlereagh held firm in opposing the

division of France—which they believed would only sow the seeds for future conflict. Instead, the French were forced to pay reparations and to return their looted art treasures; in addition, it was temporarily occupied by the allied armies, but it was kept intact.

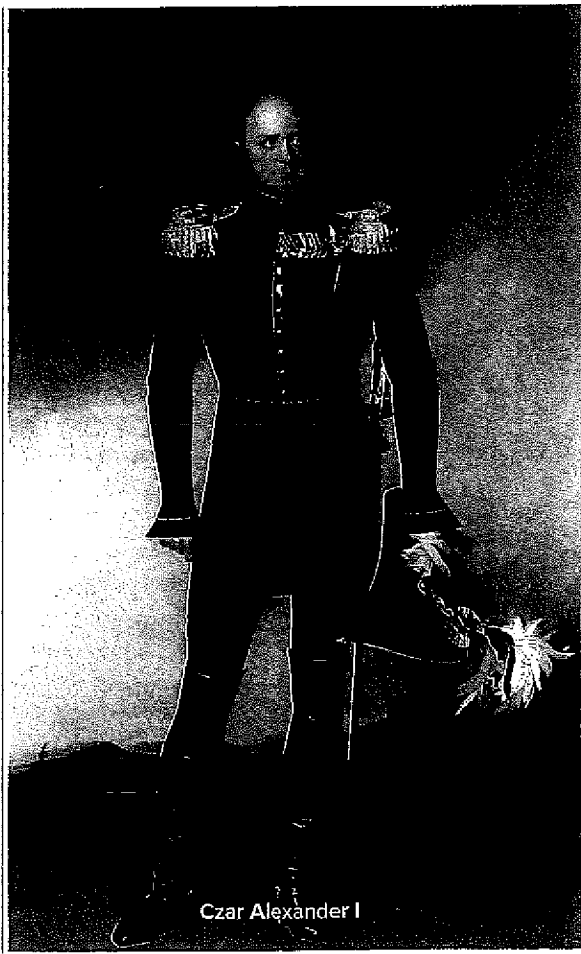
*The allies also took several further steps to preserve the peace. The four allied powers (Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia) agreed that their sovereigns and foreign ministers should personally meet for periodic reunions—a plan known to historians as the “Congress System.” In an age before the telegraph, telephone, or Internet, this was nothing short of revolutionary.* “It really appears to me to be a new discovery in the European government,” observed Castlereagh, “at once extinguishing the cobwebs into which diplomacy obscures the horizon, bringing the whole bearing of the system into its true light, and giving to the great powers the efficiency and almost the simplicity of a single state.”

Over the next seven years, peacetime congresses were convened at Aix-la-Chapelle, Troppau, Laibach, and Verona. The allies met to discuss issues among themselves and then to impose their will on the rest of Europe—an embryonic form of world government. The system soon became focused on suppressing the revolutions that had broken out in Spain and Italy. Eventually the system fell apart when Britain, with its parliamentary system, could not agree with the continental powers that revolutionary states should be suppressed as a matter of course.

A looser system of cooperation among the great powers nevertheless persisted in what became known as the “Concert of Europe.” Ambassadorial conferences—a mechanism introduced by the Congress System—continued to deal with crises such as the Belgian Revolution of 1830, when the meetings of the

London Conference resulted in Belgian independence.

One unexpected legacy of the Congress System occurred a century later when Woodrow Wilson proposed the formation of the League of Nations. Wilson’s Fourteen Points called for “a general association of nations . . . for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” British leaders looked back to the operation of the Congress System for guidance in designing the new League, as seen in the Phillimore Committee and the Cecil Draft. The “Council” of the League of Nations was composed of the allied great powers in almost exact imitation of the Congress System. At Dumbarton Oaks in 1945, the League’s Council became the new Security Council of the United Nations, whose veto-yielding permanent members were the victors of World War II (and thus excluding Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil).



Czar Alexander I