

## The Conservative Order 1815 – 1830

### Background:

We concluded the fall semester with the Enlightenment, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, and Romanticism. The Enlightenment applied scientific thinking to both the natural world and human society, and the French Revolution experimented with various forms of representative and direct democracy in its attempt to realize Enlightenment ideals. In France, monarchy and aristocracy had been replaced by popular sovereignty, and a written constitution that guaranteed individual rights replaced the arbitrary will of the king. The Romantics supported the political goals of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, but rejected neoclassical poetry and painting. Nationalism was both a *product of* the French Revolution, as seen in the French citizen's army, and a *response to* the Napoleonic wars, as seen in the rise of German nationalism promoted by Fichte and Herder. The Congress of Vienna, guided by the conservatism of Burke, de Maistre, Castlereagh, and Metternich, attempted to restore monarchy and aristocracy across Europe after the defeat of Napoleon. Liberalism emerged as the gradual continuation of the Enlightenment and nationalism further challenged the Congress of Vienna's new conservative order.

### Conservatism

Conservatism emerged as a self-conscious political outlook in response to the French Revolution and Napoleon. A natural conservatism, represented by tradition and hierarchy, had existed for centuries, but a deliberate and concerted conservatism emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The new conservatism was a self-conscious alliance between monarchy, aristocracy, and established churches. All three were skeptical of representative democracy and written constitutions that enshrined individual rights or equality. The churches and their schools were defensive towards the Enlightenment and aimed to uphold the political and social status quo. Every post-1815 government that had been involved in the Napoleonic wars faced a transition from wartime to peacetime, and had to deal with social disruption and employment concerns. The tendency of the conservative statesmen of the Congress of Vienna was to overlook and disregard the welfare of the lower class during these years. Nationalism and liberalism were the two main challenges to the conservatism of post-1815 Europe. The Congress of Vienna, which included Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, France, and Russia became the Concert of Europe, which aimed to maintain a balance of power, actively preserve peace, and repress rebellions against conservative governments. The diplomacy of post-Napoleonic Europe represented a new direction in international affairs because the major powers of Europe sought to maintain peace.

### Austria

Austria was the most ethnically and linguistically diverse of the major European powers and nationalism was a real threat that Metternich sought to control. Austria contained a large number of German-speaking people and he sought to prevent the formation of a German nation-state that would challenge Austria externally and inspire nationalism internally. The Congress of Vienna created the German Confederation, which was controlled and led by the Habsburgs of Austria. Metternich also sought to prevent constitutionalism from arising within the German

Confederation because he believed that individual rights encouraged opposition to monarchy and aristocracy.

### **Prussia**

Within the German Confederation, the youth still retained the nationalism that had developed in response to the Napoleonic wars and they dreamed of a united Germany that would embrace constitutionalism. The Prussia of Frederick William III had experienced liberal reforms, including the abolition of serfdom and expansion of public education, but Frederick became reactionary after 1815. Nonetheless, student political associations referred to as “Burschenschaften” arose at various universities within Prussia and in other German states. Metternich suppressed the associations as subversive hotbeds of liberalism and in 1819 the Carlsbad Decrees outlawed the student groups.

### **Great Britain**

In Great Britain, the aristocracy dominated both houses of the British Parliament. The Tories were in the majority and led by Lord Liverpool, and the Whigs were the minority. The Tories benefited the landed and wealthy classes after the Napoleonic wars with the passage of the Corn Law in 1815. The law made grain *more* expensive by limiting *imports* of grain, and the Parliament abolished the *income* tax (progressive) in favor of the *sales* tax (regressive). The lower class began to organize for political reform, but Parliament viewed any changes as a “slippery slope” toward violent revolution. In response to perceived lower-class anger, the Tories passed the Coercion Act of 1817 to suspend habeas corpus, and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 forcefully disrupted a peaceful political gathering in Manchester. The Six Acts of 1819 further restricted freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The working class desired to reform Parliament, and then Parliament would pass legislation that only increased the people’s desires for reform. The Cato Street Conspiracy to blow up the British cabinet was foiled and the organizers executed. The event discredited the reform movement in the eyes of the public, but reform efforts would continue with the emergence of the Chartist Movement in the 1830s.

\*Note that the Corn Law is an example of government interference in the economy that is seen as corrupt and favoring the wealthy. The classical liberals who promoted *laissez-faire* economics would be opposed to such legislation in favor of free trade. If cheaper grain could be imported from the Continent, then the lower class would have more purchasing power and a higher standard of living. The *laissez-faire* approach would obviously impact the lower class much differently in the context of working conditions, wages, etc. The point is that government is always interfering in the economy, a perfectly free market is a myth, government is always involved in some way, the question is what class or group is benefitting from the government’s policies.

## **France**

In post-1815 France, the Bourbon monarchy was restored with Louis XVIII (1814-1824), the brother of Louis XVI. The new government was a constitutional monarchy. The Charter was the new constitution, which preserved the rights guaranteed by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* and designated Catholicism as the official religion with religious toleration. Louis XVIII retained the Napoleonic Code, which guaranteed legal equality. The bicameral legislature was highly polarized between liberals who wanted to pursue the ideals of the French Revolution and ultra-royalists who wanted to restore as much aristocratic privilege as possible.

Charles X (1824-1830) was supported by the ultra-royalists and he conceded to many of their demands. Battles erupted between the monarchy and the legislature over the principle of “ministerial responsibility” because Charles X attempted to usurp the power of the legislative branch by making ministers loyal to him. All the while, the lower classes were being neglected and the upper-middle class feared that France was returning to pre-1789 politics dominated by the super-wealthy.

## **Russia**

In 1825, Tsar Alexander I died unexpectedly and when his brother Nicholas succeeded him, the officers of the Moscow regiment refused to swear allegiance to the new ruler and called for a constitution. The leaders of this “Decembrist Revolt” advocated constitutionalism and the abolition of serfdom. The reformers were either executed or exiled. The revolt was a failure, but symbolized the birth of liberalism in Russia. Tsar Nicholas I proceeded to reject liberal reforms and became a symbol of autocracy. He refused to abolish serfdom because he would lose the political support of the nobility. He instituted widespread surveillance and censorship to prevent liberal ideas from Western Europe from influencing his people. The church, government, and schools within Russia upheld the political status quo by promoting “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism” as the pillars of society.

## **Italy**

The Italian peninsula had been carved up into nine separate states at the Congress of Vienna, and most of these states were dominated by Austria and had reactionary (very conservative) governments. Liberal and nationalist reform groups existed amongst the people at the grassroots level, but the governments actively sought to repress them.

## **Spain**

The Bourbon monarchy had been restored in 1814 with Ferdinand VII who agreed to a constitutional monarchy based on liberal principles. Once in power, Ferdinand VII undermined the constitution and rejected liberalism. A revolt against the monarchy began in 1820, but the Congress of Europe, led by French troops, crushed the revolt and restored the monarchy in 1823. Spain was a symbol of the post-Napoleonic political environment: liberalism would be contained through military force.

## **Greece**

In 1821, the Greeks revolted against the Ottoman Empire, and the Congress of Europe supported the Greek rebellion with military aid. The Greek rebellion was supported by nearly everyone and seemed to fill a variety of agendas. For conservatives, it was an economic and political opportunity. For liberals, the Greek cause was the cause of liberalism itself. For nationalists, the Greek cause was an example of national self-determination. For cosmopolitan Romantics, it was a heroic struggle for freedom. Great Britain, France, and Russia provided military aid and by 1830 Greece was an independent nation with a new *monarchy*.

## **Serbia**

During the Napoleonic wars the Serbians fought a guerrilla war against the Ottoman Empire, but they did not gain independence, like Greece, until 1830. The Serbians were aided by Russia who was a natural ally because both were Slavic and Eastern Orthodox. After independence, Serbia continued to seek additional territory and this created tensions with Austria. Russia would remain Serbia's ally until World War I, and the Serbians would play a crucial role in the outbreak of that conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The ideas of the Enlightenment and the actions of the French revolutionaries had challenged the political and social hierarchy that had existed for over 1,000 years across Europe. After Napoleon's defeat, the leaders of the major powers actively sought to maintain their power in the face of what must have seemed like certain, if not gradual, change. From Great Britain to Russia, the basic ideas of liberalism, which included individual rights, popular sovereignty, and written constitutions, was actively suppressed. At the same time, the process of industrialization was creating new social conditions that would lead people to demand more from government, and in the absence of government action, a voice in government themselves.

The conservatism of Burke, de Maistre, and Metternich was opposed to the Enlightenment and French Revolution. They tended to defend monarchy, aristocracy, and the role of the state church in society. As we have seen, criticizing the events of the French Revolution is reasonable enough, but rejecting the Enlightenment and liberalism is simply a lost cause. Liberalism will triumph in Europe as the nineteenth century continues, as it already had in the United States. However, certain characteristics of the conservative outlook remain influential today: suspicion towards innovation, subjecting grand plans to careful scrutiny, respecting old habits and traditions, and suspicion towards the perfectibility of human nature.

## **Nationalism and Liberalism Challenge the Conservative Order**

### **Nationalism**

Nationalism emerged as the single most powerful political ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nationalism is the concept that a “nation” is composed of people who primarily share a common language, and secondarily share common customs, culture, and history; and because of this should be governed by the same government. Nationalism insists that political and ethnic boundaries should coincide. Again, this was a new idea. The Congress of Vienna defended monarchy, which did not rule a territory based on ethnic or linguistic commonality. Thus, nationalism stood in opposition to the Congress of Vienna and monarchy. Furthermore, nationalism often implicitly advocated popular sovereignty and liberalism. Nationalism as an outlook was constructed by intellectuals and disseminated through education. For the first time, “national” histories and “national” literatures were compiled and taught to future generations. The individual’s conception of themselves as “French” or “German” or “British” was formed through education, and the individual’s belief in their country’s unique identity was taught. Today, a student who attends an international school will lack the nationalism of a student who attends a school dominated by one national or ethnic group that promotes national identity. Likewise, a student whose state does not promote state pride will lack a sense of state identity.

### **Liberalism**

Early nineteenth-century classical liberalism was the political continuation of the Enlightenment. Liberals sought to establish legal equality, religious toleration, and freedom of the press. The liberal goal was to protect individual rights and to promote representative, constitutional government. Liberals wanted to expand political participation to the educated, wealthy, property-owning classes. They opposed both aristocracy and full democracy. The liberals were not concerned with the rural or urban working class. The classical liberals derived their views from John Locke and Adam Smith, and they sought to remove economic restraints associated with government intrusion such as mercantilism and protectionism. Classical liberals viewed labor as a commodity that should be bought and sold freely without government fixing wages or prices.

### **France**

Charles X was an ultra-royalist who still believed in “rule by divine right.” He paid aristocrats for the land they had lost in the French Revolution, restored primogeniture, and made sacrilege punishable by imprisonment and death. Liberals who wanted to preserve constitutional monarchy based on liberal principles opposed Charles X wholeheartedly. On July 26, 1830 Charles X issued the July Ordinances, which restricted freedom of the press and restricted the franchise to the wealthiest citizens. Essentially, Charles X attempted a royal coup. The people of Paris took to the streets in opposition and battles between citizens and soldiers ensued. On August 2, Charles X abdicated and upper-middle class reformers that supported constitutional monarchy proclaimed Louis Philippe, the duke of Orleans, the new “king of the French.” The “Revolution of 1830” was carried out by the lower class and the middle class, but the lower class was deliberately excluded from the government (much like the Liberal Phase of the French Revolution). The government of

Louis Philippe was called the July Monarchy and the working class was ignored. Liberalism had triumphed, but the working class would soon promote an alternative: socialism.

### **Belgium**

The “July Revolution” in Paris spread liberal hopes to neighboring Belgium, which had merged with Holland in 1815. The two countries differed in language and religion, and a provisional government was declared in Belgium. Holland sent troops, but Belgium was victorious. The provisional government wrote a liberal constitution and in December 1830 Great Britain recognized Belgium as an independent nation. In 1831, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg became king of the Belgians and would maintain close ties to Great Britain. Like the Serbian and Russian alliance, Belgium and Great Britain would remain allies until World War I, and Belgium would play a role in the outbreak of that conflict.

### **Poland**

After news of the rebellions in France and Belgium, an insurrection led by soldiers and students broke out in Warsaw. Poland had its own parliament, but it was ruled by the Russian czar. The Polish parliament declared the insurrection a nationalist revolution and Nicholas I sent Russian troops to suppress it. The uprising was crushed and Russia remained the most determined enemy of both liberalism and national self-determination.

### **Ireland**

Ireland’s relationship with Great Britain was somewhat like Poland’s relationship with Russia. During the French Revolution in the 1790s, Irish nationalists had rebelled against British rule. In 1800, Parliament passed the Act of Union to allow Ireland to send one hundred members to the House of Commons. However, only Protestants could be elected to represent the overwhelmingly Catholic population. In the 1820s, during the Greek rebellion against the Ottomans, Irish nationalists organized the Catholic Association to agitate for Catholic representation in Parliament. In 1829, the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed to allow Catholics to be elected to Parliament. Other Protestant nonconformists (non-Anglicans) were also allowed to serve in Parliament. The conservative Tories were bitterly divided over Catholic emancipation and the liberal Whigs soon came to power as Tory unity fragmented.

### **Great Britain**

George IV died in 1830 and was succeeded by William IV. Elections brought the Whigs, supported by the industrial middle class, to power in the House of Commons. They introduced a reform bill with two goals: 1) Improve representation, and 2) Extend the franchise. Improving representation involved getting rid of “rotten boroughs,” which were areas with few voters whose representative exercised as much power as the representative of a city. The other means of improving representation was giving representation to new cities that had arisen during the Industrial Revolution. Extending the franchise involved expanding the vote to more of the middle class. The Whigs, led by Earl Grey, passed the reform bill, but the House of Lords rejected it. Ultimately, the Reform Bill of 1832 passed after William IV threatened to simply create more seats in the House of Lords to have a majority in favor. The franchise was increased by 50%, but

a property and gender qualification still existed. The Reform Bill of 1832 benefitted the upper-middle class. Great Britain was gradually embracing liberal reforms.

Debates ensued within Parliament about social reform and economic policy. Over time, the conservative Tories (aristocratic landowners) were actually more inclined to support legislation that would improve the lives of the working class and ameliorate the worst aspects of industrialism (possibly to avoid full-scale revolution), while the liberal Whigs (merchants and industrialists) continued to promote legislation that embodied economic liberalism, or *laissez-faire*. While the upper-middle class experienced an increase in its political influence when the Whigs took power in Parliament, the working class promoted full democracy with the Chartist Movement. The People's Charter of 1838, written by the London Working Men's Association, was presented to Parliament in 1839 and 1842. The People's Charter called for universal male suffrage, the elimination of property requirements for MPs, annual salaries for MPs, and annual sessions of Parliament. The People's Charter was designed to make membership in Parliament possible for people of the lower and working classes. The Chartist Movement promoted reform through peaceful, constitutional means, but Parliament ignored all their demands.

\*Note: The demands of the Chartist Movement were considered idealistic and impractical at the time. Ultimately, all their proposals were passed and are now taken for granted as common sense and fundamental aspects of democratic self-government.