The Congress of Vienna

After Napoleon had finally been defeated in 1815, the European monarchs breathed a huge sigh of relief. After all, the French Revolution and the development it had triggered had dominated European politics for more than a quarter of a century. Napoleon had not always been a passionate advocate of the French Revolution, yet his conquest and occupation of Europe had contributed substantially to the spread of its ideas – liberty, equality, and fraternity – all over the continent.

Having defeated Napoleon, the monarchs of Europe were eager to ensure the restoration of peace and order. They were particularly anxious about the legacy of the ideas of the revolution, and therefore the governments of Europe were determined to follow policies that provided stability and squelch any kind of political turmoil.

The Congress of Vienna, a conference of diplomats from all over Europe, tried to settle political and territorial questions that had arisen from the Napoleonic Wars. The Congress began in 1814 when Napoleon was still exiled on Elba. In the beginning, delegates could not agree on any solutions which helped Napoleon re-establish his rule in France after his return from exile. However, after Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the Congress of Vienna took up its work again.

The countries that had made the most vital contributions to defeat Napoleon were Russia, Great Britain, Prussia, and Austria. Their representatives at the Congress were Tsar Alexander I of Russia, Lord Castlereagh – foreign secretary of Great Britain – King Frederick William III of Prussia, and Prince Klemens von Metternich* – chief minister of Austria and chairman of the conference. Although inferior to the royal members of the Congress in rank, Metternich was the chief architect of the policies outlined by the Congress. As the Congress of Vienna aimed at establishing a stable political system, it was not only for the victorious powers to decide on the future of Europe. Therefore, Charles de Talleyrand, representative of King Louis XVIII of France, also played an important part at the Congress.

The Congress of Vienna was guided by certain principles, one being the idea of legitimacy. It was Metternich’s firm belief that it was necessary to restore the legitimate monarchs who would preserve traditional institutions in order to re-establish peace and stability in Europe. Consequently, the Bourbon dynasty returned to power not only in France, but also in Spain and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. A number of rulers returned to their thrones in the German and Italian states as well.

Elsewhere, however, the principle of legitimacy was largely ignored because of the second, more practical principle at the Congress: the idea of compensation and the balance of power*. The victorious powers soon started quarrelling over the spoils, which is illustrated by the way the Congress treated Poland. Napoleon had created the Grand Duchy of Warsaw from Prussia’s Polish territory and then had given it to his ally, the King of Saxony. Now Russia, regarding itself as the power which had contributed most to Napoleon’s military defeat, claimed this territory. Prussia agreed to this proposal on condition that Saxony would be given to Prussia. The other victorious great powers, Austria and Great Britain, were concerned about this Russo-Prussian deal looming on the horizon. Austria did not want Prussia to acquire Saxony because it feared that this would make Prussia too strong in German affairs. Great Britain was anxious about Russia becoming too powerful.

Then Talleyrand suggested a compromise which could be accepted by the rivalling powers. Prussia was compensated for the loss of its Polish territory by being given two-fifths of Saxony, Westphalia, and most of the left bank of the Rhine with Cologne, Trier and Koblenz. Austria was compensated for its loss of the Austrian Netherlands by receiving the two wealthy northern Italian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia. Russia was given three-quarters of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw where a new, nominally independent Polish kingdom was established with the Romanov dynasty of Russia as its hereditary monarchs. Congress Poland was guaranteed its independence, but in reality, the kingdom remained under Russian control. In addition to large parts of Poland, Rus-
A further major aim of the Congress of Vienna was to prevent France from threatening the rest of continental Europe again. However, if the principle of the balance of power was to stabilize Europe and to prevent a further large-scale European war, the Congress had to make sure that France would not be weakened too much. Therefore France was reduced to the boundaries of 1792 and had to pay compensation to formerly occupied countries for damages the Napoleonic Wars had brought to them.

In retrospect, the Congress of Vienna can be regarded as a success with regard to its major objectives: legitimacy and the balance of power. The territorial reshuffling of Europe did indeed ensure political stability and peace in Europe. However, the diplomats did not take account of the feelings of the people who lived in the territories that changed hands.

Conservative Order

In 1789, the French Revolution initiated an era of political turmoil and war throughout Europe that lasted for more than a quarter of a century. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna ushered in a time of reaction*. This means that those in power did not only oppose progress; they even wanted to turn back the hands of time and to return to the conditions prior to 1789.

In large parts of Europe – e.g. in Spain, the Two Sicilies, and the states of northern Italy – the reinstated rulers abolished the constitutions that had been introduced during Napoleon’s rule. Absolutism was re-established as if nothing had happened. However, the problem for the reactionaries* was that, in reality, the whole matter was not that simple because Napoleon’s conquests had led to the spread of new political ideas and eventually also to the rise of nationalism. National feelings were particularly promoted by writers, artists, and intellectuals by emphasizing their people’s common language, culture, and history. This development was regarded as extremely dangerous by the reactionary powers and had to be suppressed. The Congress of Vienna therefore tried to keep the desire for national unity under control. Many Italians and Poles, for example, had hoped for national states, but their expectations remained unfulfilled.

The desire for national unity in Germany came closer to fulfilment. The Congress of Vienna created a new league of German states, the Deutscher Bund (German Confederation). This confederation consisted of 38 sovereign states in what had once been the Holy Roman Empire. Austria and Prussia were the two German great powers; the other states varied in size. However, many German nationalists were bitterly disappointed since this new political organization of Germany was nothing like the national state they had dreamed of. Actually, the German Confederation had little power. It had no real executive, and its only central organ was the German Federal Parliament (Bundestag) in Frankfurt am Main. An Austrian delegate always presided over this assembly which needed the consent of all member states to take action, making it virtually powerless.

The Congress of Vienna was not really an answer to the questions of the time. It struck at the symptoms rather than deal with the causes of unrest. There was a lot of tension beneath the surface. As a result, the governments of Europe were still haunted by the idea of revolution. Consequently, the four great powers that had defeated Napoleon – Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria – agreed to continue their alliance. The chief purpose of this Quadruple Alliance was to maintain stability in Europe by opposing and – if necessary – fighting any future revolutionary movements.

Tsar Alexander I of Russia even went one step further. He believed in absolute monarchy and the divine right of monarchs. To his mind, Christian moral principles and tradition should guide monarchs and were necessary to maintain peace and prevent revolutions. Thus, Orthodox Russia, Catholic Austria, and Protestant Prussia
formed the Holy Alliance. Gradually, all the rulers of Europe joined the alliance except the British king, the Ottoman sultan, and the pope. The members of the Holy Alliance derived their right of intervention against all liberal* and nationalist* movements from their responsibility to God.

However, the Holy Alliance’s significance was mostly symbolic. The Quadruple Alliance was far more practical and developed into what was called the “Concert of Europe.” It aimed at maintaining peace and the status quo* in Europe. According to the Concert of Europe, these aims could only be achieved by preserving the balance of power created by the Congress of Vienna. France was admitted in 1818 when it had fulfilled the terms of the peace settlements. The Concert of Europe held periodic conferences and lasted until 1848.

**The Metternich System**

Not only did Prince Metternich play a vital role at the Congress of Vienna, but he also strongly influenced European politics until 1848. That is why the 30 years after the Congress of Vienna are called the “Age of Metternich.” Metternich firmly believed in absolute monarchy and fiercely opposed constitutions and liberalism*. The movement of liberalism had its roots in the American and French revolutions. Liberals thought that a state must be based on the rights of individuals – e. g. freedom of speech, religion, and the press – and the rule of law.

From Metternich’s point of view, these ideas – especially in combination with nationalism* – were an enormous threat to the peace and stability the Congress of Vienna had just painstakingly established. Metternich therefore developed a highly efficient system in Austria that was to prevent revolution and to preserve absolutism. His methods were very rigid. He set up a secret police system that helped him spy on potentially revolutionary organizations. Many liberals were imprisoned or exiled. Most states of the German Confederation adapted Metternich’s system.

This system was efficient and created an atmosphere of intimidation, prompting people to concentrate on the domestic and – at least in public – the non-political. The strict publication rules and censorship made many writers concern themselves with primarily non-political subjects like historical fiction and country life. Political discussion was usually confined to the home amongst close friends. The historical period between 1815 and 1848 is also called “Biedermeier.”

Nevertheless, a number of liberals continued their struggles and some uprisings arose in Europe. Metternich knew that political liberalism could only be fought on an international level. Consequently, he turned the Concert of Europe into an instrument of suppression. Austria, Russia, and Prussia agreed to cooperate in order to quell any attempt aiming at revolution, even in other countries. Britain refused to agree to this principle, arguing that it had never been the intention of the Concert of Europe to interfere in the internal affairs of other states, except in France. Apart from that, Britain was a constitutional monarchy itself and had a political system based on liberal ideas. The people of Britain openly sympathized with other peoples trying to dispose of their authoritarian governments. In 1822, Britain withdrew from the Concert of Europe.

**Repression and Revolts – Europe after the Congress of Vienna**

After 1815, the forces of reaction operated successfully for a time, especially in the Austrian Empire and the German states. Metternich’s spies were everywhere, searching for evidence of liberal or nationalist plots.

Liberal and national movements in the German states were mostly limited to university professors and students. *Burschenschaften* were organized throughout Germany, student societies dedicated to pursuing the aim of a free, united Germany. Their ideas and their principles – “Honour, Liberty, Fatherland” – were inspired by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn who had organized gymnastic clubs (*Turnvereine*) during the time of the Napoleonic Wars in order to promote the physical fitness of German youth. Jahn encouraged his followers to honour their German heritage and urged them to disturb the lectures of professors whose views were not in accordance with nationalist ideas.
From 1817 to 1819, the *Burschenschaften* pursued activities that alarmed German governments. At an assembly held at the Wartburg Castle in 1817 (*Wartburgfest*), the crowd burned books written by conservative authors. When, in 1819, the reactionary playwright August von Kotzebue was assassinated by a radical student, Metternich summoned the leaders of the larger states of the German Confederation to Karlsbad in Bohemia in order to adopt measures known as the “Karlsbad Decrees” (*Karlsbader Beschlüsse*). These closed the *Burschenschaften*, established censorship of the press, and placed the universities under strict observation and control. In addition to that, an organization was formed to search for secret revolutionary activities. The Karlsbad Decrees also prohibited all political reforms that collided with absolute monarchy.

Due to this repression, liberal and national movements went underground all over Europe. In 1820, a revolt in Spain forced the king, Ferdinand VII, to restore the constitution he had just abolished. The four continental members of the Concert of Europe – Austria, Prussia, France, and Russia – intervened and sent a French army to Spain in order to quell the rebellion. In 1823, they reinstated Ferdinand to full power, brutally crushing the revolt and its leaders.

However, the Spanish revolt inspired other upheavals. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, revolutionaries forced the government to grant a constitution, but an Austrian army put down this revolt. The people of Portugal also forced their ruler to accept a constitution. A few years later, however, it was abolished and absolute monarchy was restored.

The most important revolt of the 1820s took place in Greece. In 1821, the Greeks revolted against the Turks in order to achieve independence from the Ottoman Empire. Metternich influenced European rulers to refuse Greek pleas for aid. However, many people throughout Europe openly sympathized with the Greek struggle for freedom and came to the support of the Greeks, either as volunteers or by sending arms. Finally, Russia, Great Britain, and France put the Ottoman sultan under pressure and, in 1829, Greece became an independent state.

The successful Greek struggle for independence can be regarded as the first real failure of Metternich’s system in Europe. It showed that the ideas of nationalism and liberalism encouraged by the French Revolution could not be suppressed forever.

Jochen Marx