

Overview of the Congress of Vienna

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After many years of withering conflict, Napoleon had finally been beaten. This was accomplished in large measure because his four principal opponents, Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia, had agreed that they would not accept any separate peace overtures. In the same spirit, the same four allies agreed to meet in Vienna, in consultation with French representatives, to create the foundations of a lasting peace. The Congress of Vienna, which ran from September 1814 to June 1815, accomplished this goal.

A formal peace treaty between the Allies and Napoleon was signed on May 30, 1814. The Bourbon heir to the French throne, heretofore the Count of Provence, was made king as Louis XVIII; Napoleon was sent to Elba, albeit as ruler, rather than as prisoner. Both of these facts are part of an overall policy that also informed the Congress of Vienna. France was perceived as a very dangerous, destabilizing force in European politics, and as such, it must be contained, but it would not be possible to do so under the conditions of a punitive peace settlement. France would be treated lightly, and would be given a voice at Vienna.

The delegations met on September 18, 1814. The Russian Tsar and Prussian King came personally, and of course, the Austrian Emperor was the official host of the conference, but only Tsar Alexander led his delegation in practical terms. The other leading negotiators were Prince von Metternich for Austria, Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh for Britain, Prince von Hardenberg for Prussia, and the long-serving Talleyrand for France.

In general terms, all participants were in agreement about the purpose of this conference, which was the creation of a durable peace in Europe. Each had particular national goals, such as Russia's interests in Poland and Austro-Prussian rivalry in Germany, but to a certain degree, such goals could be, and were, subordinated to the need for a practical and stable system. Similarly, the participants generally preferred the restoration and preservation of pre-revolutionary boundaries and royal families, but exceptions were made for pragmatic reasons. For example, the Austrians might have liked to reassert their rights to Belgium, but without any realistic means to defend such a distant province, it was deemed better to grant it to Holland and consolidate a stronger position within Germany.

Much has been made about the intrinsic conservatism of the Congress. The participants distrusted the ideology of the French Revolution and worked to undermine any movements that seemed to emulate it. Instead, they preferred monarchical systems and traditional social structures, and saw them as the basis for any lasting peace. In reality, this observation points to one of the strengths of the Congress of Vienna: it found a solution

that balanced power and motivation against each other. That is to say, it created a “balance of power” that made it difficult for any one state to embark upon an aggressive war, because the other great powers would have more than enough power to crush it through common action; but it also created a system that was considered by the same great powers to be basically fair and appropriate, which served to reduce the likelihood that any one party would wish to engage in aggression.

Castlereagh, Metternich and Talleyrand had particular reason to be pleased about the final agreement; nearly all of their key points were met. France reverted back to its traditional borders, but did not lose territory, except for a couple of overseas colonies. The creation of the German Confederation made a viable defensive power out of the numerous German principalities without giving either Austria or Prussia too much power within the Confederation. Germany therefore served as a buffer against French or Russian expansion without encouraging either of its leading powers, Austria or Prussia, to aggrandize itself. Some of the smaller states that had supported Napoleon, like Saxony, survived in truncated form; others, like Poland, were lost among the great powers, with most of Poland being given over to the Tsar, while other parts were returned to Prussia and Austria. England did not gain territory, except for the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, but Castlereagh was pleased with the balance created among the other powers, and the guarantee that the territories now known as the Low Countries would not be a part of one of the other great powers.

Then, in March 1815, just ten months after his arrival in Elba, Napoleon escaped. He returned to France, where he found an ecstatic welcome, and soon he embarked upon one last throw of the dice. With lesser men, the Congress of Vienna might have been suspended or even abandoned in light of this new information, but the negotiators carried on, confident that their coalition would defeat Napoleon again. Indeed, the effort served to renew their dedication to a common purpose, spurring them on to the resolution of outstanding differences. Notably, the final draft was prepared and signed nine days before Napoleon’s conclusive defeat at Waterloo: June 9, 1815.

Napoleon’s surrender and deportation to St. Helena marked the end of the Napoleonic era, and the Congress of Vienna had already closed, but the actual work of the great powers in maintaining the peace had just begun. It was an active system that relied upon its signatories to carry on the work of the Congress as the years passed by. The four victorious allies created the Quadruple Alliance to serve as guarantors of the new system; moreover, at the instigation of Russia, a second system known as the Holy Alliance was created. Russia, Prussia and Austria agreed to intervene on behalf of the others if one of the states should become embroiled in revolution.

The system worked as intended for over thirty years. Then, in 1848, revolution arose again throughout Europe, with mixed results. Local wars appeared again, from the Crimean War in 1854 to the wars of Prussia in 1864, 1866 and 1870, but there was no general European war until 1914, nearly a century after the Congress of Vienna. As an effort intended to preserve peace in Europe, it must be considered successful.

Progressive historians often criticize the Congress of Vienna for its hostility to liberal ideology and its refusal to take consideration of national aspirations. This is tantamount to accusing the Congress of Vienna of failing to live up to the standard set by the Treaty of Versailles. A comparison of the two systems is instructive. Both were intended by their framers to build a lasting peace after a long and devastating war, and both attempted to strike a balance between political power and an appeal to justice. The Congress of Vienna led to 99 years of general peace and contributed to World War I only insofar as the great powers had forgotten how devastating a general European war could be; the Treaty of Versailles was followed by only 20 years of peace, and when World War II broke out, the Treaty was one of the major reasons for the war. Clearly, the Congress of Vienna created a much healthier system in the context of its time.

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