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The Long Shadow of the Congress of Vienna: From International Peace to Domestic Disorders

The question of how to obtain and maintain a state of *peace* in Europe has been at the fore of the political agenda for decades. Since World War II, there has been hope that an effective *security* policy might end the plight of war and violence and could eventually bring peace to the world. In particular, the Allies' intention of creating a more «robust» international order than that of the League of Nations had led to the establishment of the UN Security Council with a right of veto, which included the two new super-powers: the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The construction of that post-war order was undoubtedly influenced by the Congress of Vienna settlement (1815), which had been dominated by a syndicate of four European powers (Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia). More recently, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, political leaders of the major countries, as well as the academic community, have been much concerned with the notion of *security*, but this time against a new type of threat, not coming from other states, and therefore far different from conventional war: terrorism. Even in that last case, can the diplomatic precedent set by the Congress of Vienna (1814/1815) still provide us with indications on how to maintain a peaceful international order? This question gives us an opportunity to query the «long shadow» that the Vienna Order has cast over the nineteenth century, and beyond. Its legacy has lasted until our times, and it might extend for some time in the future.

Without a doubt, the Vienna settlement was successful in establishing international *peace*. The European continent enjoyed a period of quiet coexistence between the great powers (which formed a single bloc), from 1815 up to the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853. At a second glance, however, the new political order proved very disappointing in terms of *security*. Shortly after the Congress, the continent witnessed an endless succession of public disorders and revolts, as soon as 1817 in Germany, and throughout the 1820s. It culminated in the spree of revolutions of 1848, which nearly brought Prussia, Austria and France to their knees. When examining the impact that the system of Vienna had on maintaining the European peace, it is therefore essential to distinguish between two essentially different aspects of *peace*: the external (foreign) and the internal (domestic). These two notions do not necessarily bear the same relationship with security.

The Birth of the Balance of Negotiation

Firstly, let us examine the notion of external peace, i.e. peace among the great powers. Less than a year after the defeat of Napoleon and the Peace of Paris of May 30, 1814, the happy outcome of the Saxon-Polish crisis helped crystallise a new relationship between the four Allied powers. This chain of events was set in motion in the winter of 1814/1815, when Tsar Alexander I of Russia sought to expand his hold on Poland, by proposing that Prussia give up its own share in exchange for the German state of Saxony. This plan, which would have extended the reach of Russia deep into central Europe, acutely worried Austria and Britain. In an effort to counter the Russian plan, the two states even proposed a secret military alliance to recently defeated France.¹ After twenty years of war and only a few months of concord between the victors, the specter of a Europe divided in two was threatening to return. Indeed, it would have been a replay of the balance of power: the division of the continent into two opposed military blocs of great powers, which had been typical of European history from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Fortunately, the peace was saved because the Russian Tsar Alexander I voluntarily backed down. The rationale for his decision was that he specifically wanted to avert that risk of splitting Europe again into a system of two opposing alliances. There is evidence that he had already been mulling the idea of a perpetual compact among the great powers by the end of 1814, in the middle of the Polish crisis.² The crisis was therefore resolved peacefully. Furthermore, Napoleon's return from the Isle of Elba strengthened the reconciliation. This episode, known as the Hundred Days, forced the Allies to work together in a hurry to complete the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna in early June 1815, so that they would be able to march back to war and crush the French Empire once and for all.

In fact, the Tsar's idea of a new European order materialised only after the final defeat of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo. In September 1815, while the Allies were occupying Paris, he proposed the treaty of the Holy Alliance to his partners Austria and Prussia. The document was ratified by almost all the states of Europe, except Britain and the Holy See. Hence, it appears that the Tsar deliberately sacrificed his own ambitions in Poland, not in order just to *keep the peace* but to *create* a lasting peace system in Europe.

The Holy Alliance was a short and unusual document, with Christian overtones, written in the mystical Zeitgeist that had emerged after the upheavals of the Napoleonic wars.³ The British envoy Castlereagh is said to have joked that it was a «piece of

1 On the Polish crisis of 1814/1815, see M. Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon*, London 2013, 98–119; S. Ghervas, «Three Lessons of Peace: From the Congress of Vienna to the Ukraine Crisis», in: *UN Chronicle* 51 (2014) 3, 9–11.

2 S. Ghervas, «Antidotes to Empire: From the Con-

gress System to the European Union», in: J.W. Boyer / B. Molden (eds.), *EUtROPEs. The Paradox of European Empire*, Chicago 2014, 49–81.

3 See M. Bourquin, *Histoire de la Sainte-Alliance*, Geneva 1954, 134–137; S. Ghervas, *Réinventer la tradition: Alexandre Stourdza et l'Europe de la Sainte-Alliance*, Paris 2008, 183–191.

sublime mysticism and nonsense», even though he recommended that his government sign it.⁴ Nevertheless, the British cabinet refused to do so.

On the other hand, what has long been overlooked in the scholarly literature is that the Holy Alliance was also influenced by *perpetual peace*, a notion that had known a vogue in the previous century. One of its chief proponents was Abbé de Saint-Pierre, who had published his *Plan for Perpetual Peace* in 1713, in the same year that Treaty of Utrecht was signed.⁵ He refuted the notion of *balance of power* enshrined in the treaty (in other words the division of Europe into two opposing military alliances) arguing that far from fostering peace, it would be perpetuating a state of armed truce. On the contrary, Saint-Pierre envisioned that European states would one day be able to coexist, while still retaining their freedom, within a federation – complete with a court and a common army.⁶ Later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant followed along analogous lines, albeit with some differences.

The Holy Alliance of Alexander I obviously came short of that grand scheme, since it was only a declaration of intentions. Nevertheless, it was a multilateral compact for peace, which aimed to ban war as the solution to disputes between states. It contributed to another innovation: the creation of the «Congress System», a cycle of regular, multilateral conferences that took place between 1815 and 1822 in a number of European cities. Such was the stability of this European system that it broke down only in 1853, at the outset of the Crimean War, when France and Britain went to war against Russia in the context of the Eastern Question.

All in all, these four decades of international peace in Europe can be seen as a remarkable success. Decisions among the Allies were not imposed by military diktats. Nor did the peace derive from the co-existence of two opposing blocs that neutralised each other, the *balance of (military) power*. During this unique period in European history, the whole of the continent was kept at peace by a subtle balance of diplomacy, which I call the *balance of negotiation*.⁷

Internal Affairs

This success led, however, to an apparent contradiction. Though they were technically at *peace* during the years that followed the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna and the Holy Alliance, the European states found themselves in a constant state of domestic turmoil. It is precisely in this context that we need to draw a clear distinction between peace and security. Peace, in foreign affairs, meant the *absence of war* between states. The word had, however, a second meaning, which has become somewhat archaic today:

4 See C. K. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Lord Castlereagh, 1812–1815: Britain and the Reconstruction of Europe*, London 1931, 481–483.

5 Abbé de Saint-Pierre, *Projet pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe*, Utrecht 1713–1717, 3 vols.

6 See S. Gervas, «La paix par le droit, ciment de la

civilisation en Europe? La perspective du siècle des Lumières», in: A. Lilti / C. Spector (eds.), *Penser l'Europe au XVIIIe siècle: Commerce, civilisation, empire*, Oxford 2014, 51–56.

7 S. Gervas, «The Congress of Vienna: A Peace for the Strong», in: *History Today*, 64(2014) 9, 30–32.

law and order, as in the legal term «justice of the peace», or the phrase «restore the peace» after a riot.⁸ Today, the technical equivalent in that sense would be *public order*. In French (the diplomatic language of the time) the terms used in the treaties were *paix*, *ordre* and *tranquillité*.

On the other hand, the notion of *security* – in its current sense – had not yet emerged as an autonomous subject in treaties or diplomatic correspondence. It should also be noted that there was a distinction in the French language (the diplomatic language of the time) between two words, *sécurité* and *sûreté*. The first denoted «the confidence or peace of mind which results from the opinion, grounded or not, that there is no risk of danger», in other words, subjective notion. By contrast, *sûreté* was defined as «the remoteness from any danger, the state of being safe»,⁹ i.e. the objective prevention of danger. This term was commonly used to describe police activities (*police de sûreté*) as well as employed for guarantees in diplomatic treaties, such as fortresses (*places de sûreté*).¹⁰ The term *sûreté* was used in regard to the real threat that France had posed after 1814, especially after the vexing return of Napoleon during the Hundred Days. For the rest *paix* («peace») was the overarching concept.¹¹

In any case, this provides us with a paradox: considering that Europe was at peace internationally, why did popular revolts break out continuously across the continent? Why did the Great Powers have to resort to repression against their own populations in order to «restore the peace»? This was indeed a major issue on the agenda of the Congress System. A key reason for these public disorders was that the monarchs of the Holy Alliance firmly adhered to the traditional idea of divine legitimacy. They still held a top-down view of society, which rejected any notion of a social contract. While they had initially felt benevolent toward their populations and had granted constitutions as well as the right to parliaments in several states, they were not prepared to listen to further claims for political representation. In front of these unanswered demands, the most active elements began voicing opinions in the press and in parliaments. Failing that, people took to the streets, as in the case of the student riots in Germany in 1817. The first manifestation of the «reaction» was thus to silence parliaments and to censor the press. To make things worse, the monarchs of the great powers routinely borrowed each others' armies to suppress revolts throughout Europe.

8 N. Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828.

9 Those two definitions are taken from *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 5th ed. (1798) and 6th ed. (1835); it was only in the late nineteenth century that «*sécurité*» incorporated the meaning of «*sûreté*».

10 See e.g. «Convention conclue en conformité de l'Article V du Traité Principal, et relative à l'occupation d'une ligne militaire en France par

une Armée alliée» (20 November 1815), in: Comte d'Angeber (Léonard Chodzko) (ed.), *Le Congrès de Vienne et les Traités de 1815*, Paris 1863–1864, vol. IV (1864), 1607–1610.

11 The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (6th ed.) defines *peace* broadly as «the quiet situation of a state, a people, a kingdom that has no enemies to fight» («*situation tranquille d'un État, d'un peuple, d'un royaume qui n'a point d'ennemis à combattre*»).

It is because of this adamant refusal of dialogue that the Congress System drifted into what we might call a *directorial system* (a syndicate of monarchs who supported each other against political competitors, and especially against their parliaments), constantly determined to «keep the peace» at all costs. The rift between the monarchs and their subjects became ever wider and culminated in the great revolutions of 1848. There lies the explanation for the drift from international peace to the Reaction, as well as the military interventions of rulers against their own populations.

The Mixed Results of the Vienna Order

While it is customary for Anglo-American historians to look at the Congress of Vienna as a paradigm of international peace, it is also worth noting that the monarchs who signed the Holy Alliance went down in the national histories of the European continent, especially in France, as tyrants and reactionaries.¹² On the one hand, it is important to correct the «black legend» of the Holy Alliance, in other words, the incomprehension of posterity about its initial intentions. Furthermore, in terms of international peace, the *modus operandi* of the Congress System was arguably a success. On the other hand, when it comes to internal order and security of the states, it is necessary to take stock of the justified critique that the system of Vienna was an unmitigated failure.

The story of Vienna should thus serve as a cautionary tale: it reminds us that it is nearly impossible to maintain public order without taking the demands for political representation into account, and without correcting social injustices. Indeed, the more the great powers of the Congress System attempted to suppress popular revolts, the more barricades they had to clear. Adam Czartoryski, the Polish patriot who had previously served the Tsar, summarised this paradox in a striking way: he stated that while perpetual peace had become the conception of the most powerful monarchs of the continent, diplomacy had corrupted it and turned it into venom.¹³ By clinging to their political doctrine of divine legitimacy, the monarchs had achieved peace among themselves and their respective states, but lost it in the hearts of their own subjects. For all that, it is remarkable that the solidarity between the European monarchs survived the hurricane of 1848, only to break down five years later over the contentious Eastern Question.

If we are ready to challenge some of the established certainties about our own international order, we could benefit from the lessons that the Congress of Vienna offers to the present world. Firstly, a *security policy*, when directed against domestic populations, could become venom and lead to such an amount of disorder, and for so long, that it could not be managed even by a great power. By contrast, establishing the conditions of peace through effective self-rule of the people and popular representation, economic

12 Gervas, «Antidotes to Empire», 54–55.

13 A. Czartoryski, *Essai sur la diplomatie* (1827), Paris 1864, 223.

prosperity, as well as the eradication of the most glaring social injustices, could be more effective than military interventions against insurgents – especially when decided (more or less arbitrarily) by a syndicate of great powers. Today, as in the years of the Congress System, the world is arguably confronted with a similar question of peace versus security, and is at a similar crossroads between stability and violence. It has, however, the benefit of hindsight, since it can draw from the experience and lessons of 1815.

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