

The Vienna Settlement: Diplomacy at Work

(What happens to alliances once they have won a major war and have to work out the details of a postwar world? In reading about the Congress of Vienna, you might compare the problems to those following World War I and World War II, which were similar conflicts.)

Important Note: To view a map of Europe in 1815, which will make it easier to follow this material, go to the following site:

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/437/#>

Objectives of the Victors

The final defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 brought an end to 23 years of war (from 1792 to 1815, with a brief respite in 1802-03) touched off by the French Revolution. The victorious powers that met at the Congress of Vienna were determined that the experience would not be repeated. The first objective shared by the victors was that France and its drive for domination of the continent had caused the wars, and that, therefore, the settlement should be crafted in such a manner as to ensure that France would not be in a position to repeat its “aggression” against the other powers. A plan—which I will detail later—existed for exactly how to accomplish this objective. The

other issue to keep in mind is that, within this larger framework, each power had its own local objectives in mind and tried to implement them. Among the powers present at the Congress of Vienna, you should also keep France in mind.

Although defeated, that country was represented by a skilled diplomat, Talleyrand. Talleyrand had been a bishop under the old regime, had served Napoleon, had turned against Napoleon, and in 1815 represented the restored monarchy of King Louis XVIII. You have to be a very skilled diplomat to accomplish all of this, so keep an eye on him. Napoleon, who he had turned against, described Talleyrand as “Shit in a silk stocking,” but I don’t want to prejudice you against him. He was a very interesting character: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Maurice_de_Talleyrand. He did an excellent job at Vienna, or did he? See the point I make later.

Besides Talleyrand representing France, Metternich represented Austria. He was the major statesman at Vienna and would dominate European diplomatic affairs until 1848. The other representatives of the major powers were Castlereagh for England, Hardenberg for Prussia, and Tsar Alexander I for Russia. Metternich and Castlereagh did not intend to impose a harsh treaty on France, because they did not want to alienate that country and drive it on the warpath again.

In the considerations about Vienna, keep in mind that the European statesmen of 1815 were generally indifferent to the pressures of their own

populations, which called for revenge against France after so many years of war. In making their decisions, they were also indifferent to the will of the people in the various territories that they shifted from one country to the other. In 1814, peace was made on the basis of maintaining the European equilibrium or the balance of power. The two statesmen who best represented this point of view were Metternich and Castlereagh. Only Prussia, led by its king Frederick William III, burned with a desire for revenge; during the wars, France had crushed Prussia militarily at the Battle of Jena and had imposed stiff peace terms on it, at one point taking away half of its territory. Prussia went so far as to demand dismemberment of France.

The Prussian view, however, did not win out. Metternich and Castlereagh wanted to maintain France intact and were willing to accept it again as a factor in the European balance. Combined with this aim, they wished to ensure that France would be a factor in the European equilibrium, but not dominate the continent. This meant that France would remain a strong country, but not be too powerful. Austria especially, but also England, took this view because it feared that if France disappeared as a major power the continent would be dominated by Russia. Metternich and Castlereagh felt that their countries had not fought so long and hard against the French only to be dominated in the future by the Russians. They therefore did not want Russia to become too powerful.

A crucial aspect here is the intimate involvement of England under Castlereagh. Generally England stayed out of European politics in “splendid isolation” because—as an island nation protected by a strong navy—it was safe from invasion. England usually intervened only at the point where a power threatened to take over the entire continent, but not before; Castlereagh, however, wanted to take action before that point. This was an unusual position and lasted only until 1822, when he committed suicide (for a quick portrait, see <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/napoleon/castlereagh.html>).

Russia was already allied with Prussia which, for diplomatic purposes, was a satellite of Tsar Alexander I (Frederick William III was grateful for Alexander’s intervention in his favor after the Battle of Jena, which mitigated the French terms, which would have been even harsher if Alexander had not intervened). Russia thus had Prussia’s support for its territorial demands and, in addition, had a candidate to become king of France. Russian success would have meant its domination of the continent.

The confluence of Russia and Prussia meant that Austria alone could not have withstood Russian power. Although England supported Austria, British strength was on the seas and it did not have a large enough army to counterbalance the Russians and the Prussians if the differences at the Congress of Vienna resulted in a war between the former allies—which it almost

did. However, before we get to that point, let's look at the position of the victors toward France.

The Plan

The general plan to curb French influence had been drawn up by British Prime Minister William Pitt (The Younger) in 1804. Once the allies defeated France, his idea was to weaken France and ring it with a series of countries that would be capable of slowing down and stopping future French attacks. Based on the history of the French Revolutionary wars, this plan included the following elements:

1. Deprive France of its conquests.
2. Make the former French satellites strong (those of them that were to be independent)
3. Build up a system of mutual protection and security to prevent future French aggression.

Concretely, this meant surrounding France by a series of relatively strong secondary powers (France had no major powers on its borders; this had facilitated its expansion during the wars). Strengthening the minor powers that bordered France would make them capable of absorbing the first blows of a

revived France and slowing down French military progress, even if they would be incapable of stopping it. The primary aim of this idea was to give the major powers that were farther away from the French borders the opportunity to mobilize and to bring in their larger armies against the French.

This general plan ultimately became Castlereagh's blueprint at the Congress of Vienna. In a sense it was "fighting the last war." It was directed against France alone and as such it was inflexible and left no room for shifting relationships. In fact, the future attack foreseen by the Vienna statesmen never materialized. The other problem was that while Castlereagh aimed to keep England involved in maintaining the balance of power on the continent, the English people and government opposed too close an involvement in continental affairs. The British government, therefore, was reluctant to take action and left the continental powers unsatisfied. Castlereagh supported Metternich on the continent because he saw Austria as a bulwark both against Russian dominance and a possible revival of French expansionism. It was Metternich and Castlereagh who made the major decisions at Vienna, and afterwards Castlereagh supported Austria in an effort to keep it strong, even if his own government, spurred by public opinion, rejected Metternich's reactionary policies. After Castlereagh's death, Britain essentially withdrew from close involvement on the continent.

The (Supposed) Principles of the Congress of Vienna

The major principles which are often said to have guided the decisions of the statesmen at Vienna (and those which their own propaganda spread far and wide) were Legitimacy and Compensation. “Legitimacy” meant that the rulers (or their descendants) who had been in power in an area before the French Revolution would be restored with their territories intact; “Compensation” meant that if it proved impossible to give the same territories back to a particular country because of strategic considerations, they would be “compensated” with different territories of equal value. It is important to remember, however, that these “principles” worked in favor only of the big powers, even though the big powers said that they would be applied to all the states that had suffered from developments during the French Revolution. To give some examples: Before the French Revolution, there were thousands of princelings in Germany who had lost their territory because the French consolidate them into larger holdings. They appealed to the Congress of Vienna to restore their holdings, but they were not restored. In Italy, the republics of Genoa and Venice had existed for centuries before the French Revolution, but instead of being restored, they were given over to other powers.

A New War?

Of the great powers at Vienna, two were unsatisfied—Prussia and Russia. England had achieved its aims (the defeat of France and colonial gains), and Austria had been promised supremacy in Italy, which it bordered. France also qualified as a “satisfied” power because a peace treaty had already been signed with the allies and it was unlikely that the newly-restored Bourbons would undertake an expansionistic war so soon after the Napoleonic wars.

The claims made by Prussia and Russia were considered excessive by Austria and England. Russia wanted all of the former Grand Duchy of Warsaw (also called the Duchy of Warsaw, a former Napoleonic satellite that had been set up by Napoleon, which included former Prussian territory that Prussia had taken in Poland in the 18th century and Napoleon had taken away: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Duchy_of_Warsaw). Prussia demanded all of the Kingdom of Saxony (in Germany), which had not abandoned Napoleon which he was being defeated. Russia and Prussia agreed here because, while the Grand Duchy of Warsaw included territory once held by Prussia, Russia supported Prussia’s demand for the Kingdom of Saxony’s being given over to Prussia; this exchange would have helped both: Russia would increase its territory and Prussia would be “exchanging” territory populated by Poles for Saxony, populated by Germans, thus making it more homogeneous.

Metternich and Castlereagh opposed this arrangement. They thought that giving Russia the Grand Duchy of Warsaw would upset the balance of power in \



Europe by making Russia dominant on the continent. In addition, they felt that Prussia's acquisition of Saxony would upset the balance in Germany by making Prussia too strong in Germany.

It seemed for a while that Europe would once again go to war, and this time the conflict would be between the allies: Austria and England against Russia and Prussia. However, another power was "unattached": France. Talleyrand was anxious to have France recognized as a legitimate member of the European family again.

As a result, talks took place which established a Triple Alliance among Austria, England, and France. Since this combination would have defeated the Russo-Prussian alliance, and given the shock that another war would have caused, the Russians and Prussians agreed to settle their differences with Austria and England. The deal they reached in February 1815 stated the following: 1. the areas of Galicia and Tarnopol would be given to Austria; Posen and Thorn went to Prussia; the rest of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw became the "Kingdom of Poland," supposedly "independent," but really a satellite of Russia with Alexander I as its king; 2. two-fifths of Saxony went to Prussia, along with another area known as Swedish Pomerania; the Duchy of Westphalia and much of the left bank of the Rhine river (Julich, Berg, Cleves, and Mark) went to Prussia as well.

What was the significance of this compromise? First, war was averted. Second, a part of the plan originally outlined by Pitt was satisfied. The left bank of the Rhine River borders on France. The territories that Prussia received were split off from the bulk of the Prussian state—therefore were difficult to defend. In other words, the Prussian possessions on the Rhine served as a “secondary state” that could act to slow down a French military advance in case of attack but would not upset the balance in Germany. The other “secondary states” will be discussed.

What about Talleyrand? Was his policy a success? On the one hand it was, because France was recognized as a member of the European family again. But on the other hand, Metternich was shrewder. He had always intended to recognize France as a great power—it was part of his policy. In return for what he had been planning to do all along, he had gotten France to support Austrian policy and had pulled off the compromise that had averted war. Also, France had previously put itself at the head of the smaller countries that were opposing big power policies; now France was won over for the big powers. Diplomacy, like much else, sometimes depends on your point of view.

Completing the Vienna System

Other territorial arrangements which were part of the general Vienna settlement illustrate the aim of the allies to contain France and the true application of Legitimacy and Compensation (refer to the map):

1. In the Northeast, Belgium, which had belonged to Austria but had been hard to defend because separated from the bulk of the country, was given to Holland, creating a new “secondary state” that would thought to be a relatively strong bulwark against a French military advance. The Belgians did not get along with the Dutch, but were ignored. Austria would be compensated in Italy;
2. On the southern border of France, Piedmont-Sardinia was strengthened by the addition of the former Republic of Genoa, a violation of “Legitimacy.” The Genoese did not get along with the Piedmontese, but they were ignored. Again, the strengthening of this state was thought to make it better able to withstand a French attack than it had been before;
3. As already mentioned, Prussia was strengthened on the Rhine in order to help bar passage by France; in addition, the territory it gained in Germany was thought to strengthen Prussia as a great power better able to intervene against France;
4. Austria was the other “reserve” great power. It was also strengthened in Germany, but particularly in Italy. It regained Lombardy, which it had lost to France. In addition, it received Venetia in compensation for Belgium, even

though this violated “Legitimacy” because the Republic of Venice had existed for centuries. Also, the Italians would continually rebel against Austrian domination.

5. In Germany, the “German Confederation” was set up to replace the “Confederation of the Rhine,” which Napoleon had created after forcing the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire which had existed since the 10th century. Numerous small German princes who had lost their territory did not regain it (violation of Legitimacy).

In November 1815, following the Hundred Days when, for a brief period Napoleon returned to power, another element of Pitt’s plan was implemented—establishment of a mutual security arrangement against France, the Quadruple Alliance between Russia, Austria, Prussia, and England.

This treaty had many antecedents, but in this version it provided for periodic congresses to discuss potentially dangerous situations in Europe. In effect, this agreement provided the “legal” framework for maintaining the decisions of the Vienna statesmen in Europe, and eventually would provide justification for interference in the internal affairs of European countries when it seemed possible that internal changes such as revolutions might produce external ones, even if only by example.

England would eventually leave this alliance, although Castelreagh would continue to provide Metternich with all the diplomatic help he could. Eventually the place of England would be taken by Bourbon France.

The Quadruple Alliance became, in fact, confused with the Holy Alliance, which was a declaration by the sovereigns supporting the existing order (Russia, Austria, and Prussia, but not England). While the Holy Alliance declared the existing social order as sacred, it did not have many consequences while the Quadruple Alliance did by sanctioning intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, particularly during the 1820s.

Having looked at the diplomatic changes, it is important to consider social and economic changes being brought about by the industrial revolution.