Constitutions and Crises from the Congress of Vienna to the Concert of Europe

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With all of the centennial-centered attention to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and

to the ensuing all-too-brief period of peace following the Paris treaties of 1919-20, recent

assessments of the Vienna Congress and the Concert of Europe have, in explicit and revisionist

comparison, been rather kind. And rightly so. Even if one only takes the shorter view of the

Vienna era of great power peace as lasting until 1848 or 1853, the Vienna settlement still looks

more robust than the one that capped the First World War; if one adopts the longer interpretation

of the peace as enduring through the end of the nineteenth century or even 1914, then all the

more so. But this was not simply because the victorious powers – unlike the Allies in the case of

Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire in 1919 – resisted the urge to draft a treaty

that would be too punitive at the expense of a France that had already changed regime.[1] Other

facets of the settlement and of the diplomatic innovations of 1814 also helped to define the

relatively peaceful international relations of the nineteenth century.

In thinking about the path or process by which European international relations

developed from the Congress of Vienna to the Concert of Europe of the succeeding decades, one

has to begin with further consideration of the nature of the Vienna settlement itself. In part as

one would expect, such reconsideration focuses on the organization of diplomacy, but it also

includes broader political culture and domestic institutions, as the version of Realpolitik

practiced by most statesmen was far from a classic "primacy of foreign policy." In my book on

the Congress of Vienna and political culture after Napoleon, I also emphasize the role of salon

society, festive culture, and the press in the praxis of European politics; here I underscore the role of constitutions as means to make territorial exchanges and regime changes more acceptable to local elites and populations, and hence highlight the role of both public opinion and political ideas (pointing towards the session on communicating the values of the congress system).[2]

Those who emphasize the success of the Vienna system tend to highlight the diplomatic effort to look ahead and avert war, as opposed to the traditional role of peace conferences in bringing to an end wars that were already being fought. This is true to an extent, but it still needs to be recognized that the regime of collective security established at the Vienna Congress and after was as much about crisis management as about crisis prevention. Such an approach already represents a significant advance on the willingness to consider even great power war as one of the first rather than one of the last policy options, but the resulting security structures were also not quite a European areopagus or security council.[3] Many of the examples often adduced of the workings of the congress system or the later concert involve putting out fires already raging, in order to stave off conflict among the main powers. The responses to the revolutionary outbreaks in Italy and to an extent Spain in the early 1820s come under this heading, as do those to the revolt in Greece and the revolution in Belgium later in the 1820s and 1830s. None of this is to say that crisis prevention did not play a role – I argue that the bases of the system did in fact look to this role, particularly in the congress phase from 1815 to 1822. But one should not stretch that interpretation too far.

The main respects in which crisis prevention came into play involved less the congresses than the ambassadorial conferences designed to coordinate policy in very specific areas that might otherwise lead to friction, and perhaps conflict. The one most often cited is the

ambassadorial conference in Paris following the Second Peace of Paris. This regular gathering

of the great power representatives to the French court was designed both to oversee Allied

occupation policy in France after Waterloo and to serve as a clearinghouse for information on the

political situation in a still-unstable France so soon after the second restoration of the Bourbon

Louis XVIII. The body met over three hundred times before the Congress of Aachen in 1818,

and kept formal protocols of the meetings, as did its counterpart in London. In the spirit of the

Quadruple Alliance, the ambassadorial conference kept a close eye on the hopefully sleeping

French giant, but the venue also offered an opportunity for the representatives of the great

powers to work through their own disagreements and relationship difficulties, whether Britain

and Russia helped shield France from Austrian and (particularly) Prussian intransigence during

the occupation, or whether Britain, Austria, and Prussia worked against too close a

rapprochement between Russia and France. Other duties were added to the ambassadorial

conference's remit, as when the final negotiations surrounding the territorial assignment and

succession rights in Parma and Lucca of the two Marie Louises – Napoleon's wife and the

Spanish infanta – were delegated to it. In this instance the French were heard from as well as

spoken to by the body and thus enjoyed some participation. Metternich also tried –

unsuccessfully – to extend the group's surveillance duties to keep an eye on radicals,

revolutionaries, and French exiles in Brussels, and the Spanish and Russian ambassadors in Paris

attempted to extend its reach even to the New World, in order to arbitrate the dispute between

Spain and Portugal-Brazil over the land north of the Rio de la Plata, here too without success

owing to British resistance.[4]

Perhaps just as significant for future diplomatic intercourse was the less-studied

ambassadorial conference in London, whose chief function was to oversee the efforts to enforce

existing agreements to curtail the African slave trade and to continue negotiations towards the

final abolition of the trade. As they were envisioned in the talks in Vienna in February 1815,

Castlereagh termed them "a sort of permanent European Congress."[5] He hoped to use the

meetings as a venue to put renewed pressure on Spain and Portugal-Brazil to agree to full

abolition of the slave trade in the near future, but he also thought that the discussions could help

avoid conflicts over measures to enforce abolition (not least involving the policing of

international waters and shipping by Britain's navy); Metternich fully agreed and stressed the

utility of such meetings in avoiding misunderstandings. This was all very much in the spirit of

preventative diplomacy behind the new congress system.[6]

The conferences did not necessarily have to be limited to the great power pentarchy.

Castlereagh hoped to get Spanish and Portuguese participation in the conferences in order to

increase their legitimacy and chances of reaching an acceptable compromise both among the

great powers and with the two main colonial powers still engaged in the slave trade, but both

states managed to avoid entanglement. In this Castlereagh continued the practice at the Vienna

Congress of mainly working through the four allied powers plus France, but bringing in other

states as needed and as their interests were affected. The French were always part of the London

discussions as full members, and thus as with their partial involvement in the Paris conferences,

France did not have to wait until the Congress of Aachen for some recognition of its continuing

great power status.

It was these gatherings in the ambassadorial conferences that if anything proved the most

significant institutionally moving forward, in the phase of the actual Concert of Europe from the

mid-1820s. The distinguishing feature of the congresses, from the Congress of Vienna to the

Congress of Verona in 1822, was that they brought together both the leading diplomats and

ministers and as many of the rulers themselves as possible, not to forget the entourages of the latter and the often rather large number of spectators, lobbyists, and hangers-on who converged on the congress venue in order to see or profit from the show. These were in other words more like summit meetings. Following the Congress of Verona, these functions and groups were disaggregated. Monarchical meetings, as the work of Johannes Paulmann has shown, with all their attendant pomp, circumstance, and public relations opportunities, enjoyed a prominent place in European political culture from the 1830s to the First World War (or indeed to the present if one reads "heads of state" for "monarchs"). Advances in transport and media helped in this development. These partly public and partly offstage encounters between rulers probably did play an important part diplomatically in facilitating trust and understanding among governments, and domestically in keeping a certain tolerance or even enthusiasm for monarchy alive among the public, both for the visiting sovereigns and for one's own.[7] The more sensitive or involved diplomatic negotiations on the other hand tended to be treated in specially-designated conferences involving mid-level personnel, experts or ambassadors as the case was. These gatherings had a lower profile than full-fledged congresses or the monarchical meetings, but press coverage and public opinion could still play a role, particularly when the venue was London, as with both the Greek conferences and those on Belgium in the late 1820s and 1830s.[8]

To some extent one can even look back to the Congress of Vienna itself for the origins of such organizational forms. The Swiss Commission and the Statistical Commission (to assess population figures and territorial boundaries) both consisted of mid-level diplomatic personnel who could pass for knowledgeable in the respective areas, and who then proceeded to work through controversial material under higher-level instruction to arrive at compromise solutions. The small commissions of Russian, Prussian, and Austrian delegates who drew up the final

treaties for the disposition of the Polish territories and the constitution for the new Duchy of Cracow also serve as a precursor for later developments, most obviously in the case of the London conferences of the later 1820s that drafted plans for Greek autonomy and independence within or beyond the framework of the Ottoman Empire.

In addition to the point of view that the peace-keeping function of the Vienna system was primarily aimed at the prevention of warfare, particularly among the great powers, another school of thought emphasizes instead that the multilateral cooperation and security regime was directed above all at the suppression of revolutionary or liberal movements and disruptions.[9] Both perspectives are partly correct. For that matter, the two approaches hang together, since most statesmen at the time believed that revolution itself formed one of the most likely sources of disruption and war. On this second question too revisionist accounts of the Vienna Congress have tended to eschew characterizing the settlement as purely reactionary or counter-revolutionary and to underscore the fact that so much of Napoleon's reshuffling of Europe's borders and political and legal institutions was allowed to stand rather than be reversed in the restorations of 1814-1815.[10]

Even here though I argue that we need to go still further and recognize the degree to which liberal constitutional ideas and respect for or fear of public opinion already entered into the thinking of most of the Vienna system's main builders. Though often overlooked, the years from 1814 to 1818 witnessed an unprecedented wave of constitutional proclamations. The constitutional charter pressed upon the returning Louis XVIII of France in 1814 and again in 1815 upon his first and second restorations by Tsar Alexander and Prince Talleyrand is the most familiar and influential example, but it was one of many. The Netherlands received a

constitution as well, and when the Belgian provinces were added to it as part of the European settlement, the constitution was extended to the new areas, with revisions, after negotiations with Belgian representatives and with a guarantee from the four powers. The first piece of the Vienna settlement, the cession of the former Republic of Genoa to the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, also involved constitutional protections for the notoriously reactionary king's new subjects. The Swiss Confederation received a new constitution guaranteeing the existence of the new, more democratic cantons, and when Norway was assigned to the Swedish monarchy in personal union in 1814, the Norwegians were able to secure the most strongly parliamentary constitution of all those issued in this period, which in fact forms the basis of the Norwegian constitution to this day. Even in the highest-level, highest stakes diplomatic showdown over the Polish and Saxon lands, the territorial settlements came with constitutional promises, duly publicized in proclamations. The promises were fixed in treaties, and as noted above, in the case of the newly-created Duchy of Cracow the constitution was drafted by delegates of the three eastern powers, with assistance from the Polish nationalist Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski and with later input from Cracovian representatives.[11]

Against such a background, I argue that the shift toward a more conservative posture occurred over several years leading up to and through the turning point of 1819 and the Carlsbad Decrees or the revolutions in southern Europe at the start of the 1820s. It was not built into the settlement of 1814-1815. Preventing revolution was part of the goal of this security regime, but the rulers and statesmen for the most part agreed that this entailed avoiding both political extremes. Of course they would need to keep an eye on radical movements, above all since they often believed the conspiracy theories about the origins of the French Revolution and the conspirators' continued machinations after Napoleon's defeat. But they also appreciated, already

at the Vienna Congress and long afterward, that too strong a counter-revolutionary reaction would itself provoke revolution in response, hence they also put pressure on restoration regimes not to be too repressive, and to respect some of the rights of the people, if not popular sovereignty as such. Metternich was somewhat more conservative than other statesmen but was no reactionary. As noted, he tried to extend the surveillance powers of the ambassadorial conference in Paris, but failed in this endeavor, and in any case he fully supported efforts to keep the French government from moving too far in the reactionary Ultra direction at the time of their parliamentary supremacy of 1815-1816 in the "Chambre introuvable." Metternich also pressured the restored Papal and Neapolitan Bourbon regimes to adopt governmental practices more in line with the times. As the Vatican representative Cardinal Consalvi reported the thrust of Metternich's views back to Rome, in appropriately Biblical imagery, if the Papal States did not adopt new principles of government more adapted to current circumstances, it would be like Noah trying to do everything as before after disembarking the ark, though the world had changed.[12] There was in other words a near consensus of the political middle, from moderate liberal to reform conservative, to avoid extremes to either side that might start a slide toward revolution.

As or more important than the effort to prevent restoration regimes from being too repressive, in a negative sense, was the positive support for governmental institutions that bore many traces of liberal thought. To be clear, this was not full parliamentarism, and popular sovereignty remained anathema. If those are one's criteria for liberalism then this was not liberal, but it was constitutional monarchy, with restrictions on royal-imperial authority and some delegated rights of government and protections for individuals and groups under the rule of law. The statesmen encouraged at least consultative representative institutions that intentionally

involved bourgeois elements and new nobles, particularly in areas of significant French influence over the previous decades. Even the recovered Habsburg lands in Italy received such institutions, and Metternich worked with partial success to get the Papal States and Naples to adopt such "consultative" rather than absolute monarchy as well.[13] The trend continued through the 1830s, with recognition of Belgian independence as a constitutional monarchy, and with the case of the new constitutional Kingdom of Greece. This even held for relations with Rome, where I note that while it is true that Metternich did not go as far toward a liberal constitution as Palmerston and the British wanted, he still, with Prussian support, urged limited representative reforms on the Vatican, and it was the French as much as anyone who scuttled the deal.[14]

This attention to constitutions also helps make a broader point about peace settlements and postwar reconstruction that is sometimes overlooked. Reconstruction efforts at the end of modern wars involve not just economic and social reconstruction but also political reconstruction, delineated among other things in constitutional settlements and amnesty agreements. This is perhaps clearest in the case of the revolutionary settlements and constitutional reforms and amendments in the combatant nations after the First World War, or in the establishment of the German Grundgesetz and French Fourth Republic alongside the Marshall Plan, currency reforms, and early thoughts of a European coal and steel community after the Second. But the effort to satisfy war-weary populations, both as victims of invading armies and as contributors to the war effort of one's own nation in an age of incipient total war, was just as notable a feature of the settlements that ended the wars against Napoleon, with its unprecedented tide of often internationally guaranteed constitutional proclamations.

There are still other elements of the Congress system that I could point to as significant in this context. In my book on the Congress of Vienna I show how important it is to analyze diplomacy and international relations in the framework of the broader surrounding political culture, including festive culture and salons, the press and markets for political memorabilia, and involving private, non-governmental actors alongside governmental ones – all of these elements of modern political life were already well in place by the early nineteenth century. I also argue that in extending scrutiny to mid-level state officials and to non-governmental actors, it is crucial to recognize that states are not monolithic entities, but are themselves composed of competing institutions and individuals or factions. Policies and interstate relations thus arise through partly contingent processes operating both within state structures and in the varied political venues of the broader landscape of European political and diplomatic culture.[15]

For present purposes though it was most important to highlight the fact that, as Paul Schroeder argued, the decision-makers of the post-Napoleonic era had indeed learned something about what it took to make and maintain peace in the post-revolutionary age.[16] They found the will to cooperate for peace and security, and to found multilateral institutions that would facilitate such cooperation and communication, including both the congresses and the ambassadorial conferences, in both cases involving multilateral face-to-face diplomacy that could keep crises from expanding further or in some cases even prevent problems from reaching the crisis stage.[17] The statesmen also believed, as we have seen, in the close connection between domestic politics and international relations, hence their greater support for constitutional settlements than historians have typically realized, and their greater heed to public opinion, or at least to the possible threat of public opinion, whether as revealed in the press or in the elite realm of salons. If anything it was the constitutions as much as the diplomatic forums that promoted

crisis prevention above crisis management. Thus at the level of both ideas and institutions,

attention to the actors, structures, and tendencies of the Congress of Vienna shows how much

that gathering did to shape the emerging Concert of Europe and its ability to keep peace among

the great powers over the coming decades, or indeed deeper into the nineteenth century.

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[1] This is true of many recent works, including: Reinhard Stauber, *Der Wiener Kongress* (Böhlau: Vienna, 2014); Wolf D. Gruner, *Der Wiener Kongress* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014); Eberhard Straub, *Der Wiener Kongress: Das große Fest und die Neuordnung Europas* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2014); Thierry Lentz, *Le congrès de Vienne: Une refondation de l'Europe 1814-1815* (Paris: Perrin, 2013); Heinz Duchhardt, *Der Wiener Kongress. Die Neugestaltung Europas 1814/15* (Munich: Beck, 2013); Mark Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

[2] Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014). Also on the role of constitutions at the Vienna Congress, Stauber, *Wiener Kongress*, 16-17.

[3] See Robert Jervis, "From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation," *World Politics* 38, 1 (1985): 58-79; Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Matthew Rendall, "Defensive Realism and the Concert of Europe," *Review of International Studies* 32, 3 (2006): 523-540; Matthias Schulz, *Normen und Praxis: das Europäische Konzert der Grossmächte als Sicherheitsrat, 1815-1860* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009).

[4] For an excellent discussion of the ambassadorial conference in Paris that covers these episodes, Jacques-Alain de Sédouy, *Le concert européen. Aux origines de l'Europe 1814-1914* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 48-68.

[5] Charles K. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1812-1815: Britain and the Reconstruction of Europe* (London: Bell, 1931), 420.

[6] Metternich in Comte d'Angeberg [pseud. J. L. Chodźko], ed., *Le Congrès de Vienne et les traités de 1815* (4 vols. Paris: Aymot, 1863), 2:725-726. The London conferences also acquired other tasks, above all dealing with the problem of the Barbary corsairs. On the negotiations generally, Vick, *Congress*, 202-208, 221-224.

[7] Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Regime und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

[8] Highlighting the peace-promoting effects of "forum talk" and face-to-face diplomacy in publicly recognized venues for such cases as Greek and Belgian independence, Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[9] Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy*.

[10] A theme particularly emphasized in Gruner, *Wiener Kongress*, Stauber, *Wiener Kongress*, and Lentz, *Congrès de Vienne*. A recent exception, still stressing the settlement's anti-liberal and anti-nationalist basis, Adam Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace: The Fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

[11] Vick, *Congress*, 167, 240-248, 318-320.

[12] Ilario Rinieri, ed., *Corrispondenza inedita dei cardinali Consalvi e Pacca nel tempo del congresso di Vienna, 1814-1815* (Turin: Unione tipografico, 1903), 732; Alan J. Reinerman, *Austria and the Papacy in the Age of*

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Metternich (2 vols. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1979-89), 1:40-43. On Metternich's reform conservatism, including admiration for the British constitution, Wolfram Siemann, *Metternich. Staatsmann zwischen Restauration und Moderne* (Munich: Beck, 2010), 59-61.

[13] Vick, *Congress*, 248-252; John A. Davis, *Naples and Napoleon. Southern Italy and the European Revolutions (1780-1860)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291-292. This is in opposition to the usual view that Metternich negotiated a deal with the returning Neapolitan King Ferdinand according to which the latter could not grant a constitution – Metternich insisted on concessions to Bonapartists and new elites as well, and he wanted to ensure that the reactionarily-inclined Ferdinand was neither too generous nor too repressive. On the Habsburg possessions, see also David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Marco Meriggi, *Amministrazione e classi sociali nel Lombardo-Veneto (1814-1848)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983). I follow Carlo Ghisalberti's distinction between absolutism and the stages of administrative, consultative, and constitutional monarchy: *Dall'antico regime al 1848: le origini costituzionali d'Italia moderna* (Rome: Laterza, 1987).

[14] Reinerman, *Austria and the Papacy*, 2:24, 35-37, 145-146. Another important piece of the puzzle for Belgium's acceptance as an independent nation was its neutralization, and as has recently been demonstrated, the concept and institution of neutrality formed another cornerstone of the Concert of Europe: Maartje Abbenhuis, *An Age of Neutrals: Great power politics, 1815-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 54-57.

[15] Making a similar point for the period leading to the First World War, Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), esp. Ch. 4.

[16] Schroeder, *Transformation*.

[17] On the role of forum diplomacy and transparency, here with Jervis, "From Balance to Concert," 71-75, 79; Mitzen, *Power in Concert*, passim; and Dan Lindley, *Promoting Peace with Information: Transparency as a Tool of Security Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Ch. 3, the latter also stressing the role of crisis management.